Death of Ivan Ilych

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1 Introduction:

The Death of Ivan Ilych – alternately called a short story or a novella – is probably the most famous shorter work of Count Leo Tolstoy. Since it was published in 1886, in Volume 12 of Tolstoy's collected works (edited by his wife, Countess Sofia Tolstoy), it's been hailed as a masterpiece by critics and readers. *Ivan Ilych* also acquired a reputation as one of *the* modern treatments of death – one that has changed the way that subject is treated.

Writing about death was nothing new, to be sure. In the 19th century, death had been a favorite subject of the Romantics and many writers who came after them. They just couldn't stop talking about it, and created dying romantic heroes of all kinds: star-crossed lovers with tragic deaths, lonely tortured artists who came to painfully beautiful ends, and valiant men in battle who sacrificed themselves. (Our popular culture still owes a lot to the Romantics.)

What was new and remarkable in Tolstoy's work was how *unremarkable* its main character – and his death – was. *The Death of Ivan Ilych* is the story of a painfully ordinary government official who comes down with an untreatable illness and dies at home slowly, painfully, and full of loneliness. He's middle aged, has an unhappy family life, and a petty personality. Rather than turning to religion, art, or the love of his life to cope with death, he turns to

doctors. About as far from a dying romantic hero as you can get. Much more like, well, us normal people.

Tolstoy himself, on the other hand, was very far from being an average Joe by the time he wrote *Ivan Ilych*. Tolstoy was born in 1828 to one of the most prominent Russian families (yes, he was a real count). Before he turned 50 he had produced both *War and Peace* (1869) and *Anna Karenina* (1877), which are traditionally considered to be among the greatest novels ever (*Time magazine* ranks them at number 3 and number 1, respectively). It's no surprise, then, that he also enjoyed the reputation of being one of the greatest writers in the world at the time.

In spite of all his fame and accomplishment, not long after writing *Anna Karenina* Tolstoy had a midlife crisis and decided that he couldn't go on living unless he found the meaning of life. The crisis only ended after an extremely powerful conversion experience (to a more radical variety of Christianity), which in Tolstoy's eyes changed *everything*. He announced his personal transformation to the world in his 1881 book entitled A Confession. He stopped thinking of himself primarily as an artist and began writing on religion and politics, advocating things like non-violence, simple and communal living, and anarchism. Followers began showing up at his estate (Yasnaya Polyana) like pilgrims to hear his pronouncements on life and see his experiments in practicing his ideal with his peasants.

The Death of Ivan Ilych was the first significant work of literature Tolstoy produced after his conversion. It's a forceful confrontation with the problem of death, and through death, the meaning of life. It's also a sharp satire of the "false" modern middle-class lifestyle (embodied in the character of Ivan Ilych). Tolstoy saw this lifestyle and attitude taking shape in his day, and thought that those who embraced it were incapable of facing death because they did not understand life.

Some readers admire the novella for its powerful moral message. Others say it shows the beginning of Tolstoy's loss of his art, and that once he became interested in teaching moral lessons, his writing lost its complexity and became one-dimensional. What do you think? Get back to us after you've read *The Death of Ivan Ilych*.

Even if we don't have a freak drapery accident and wind up with a drawn-out illness like Ivan Ilych, we're still faced with death. Death is just easier to forget about when everything seems pleasant. That's why Ivan doesn't think about it. But it doesn't matter: death sneaks up on him when he least expects it.And when Ivan becomes ill, he finds that he isn't able to enjoy many, or any, of the things he once did. Ivan finds that the friends he'd made aren't real friends, that his family doesn't really love him, and that he's totally alone. He finds that barely anything he's done in his life means anything to him.

The Death of Ivan Ilych brings to our attention the unpleasant fact that we all have to die, and that we might have to suffer a whole lot first. Our medicines might be better than those of Ivan's doctors, but we haven't gotten any closer to escaping mortality, and many people still die only after a long and painful period of disease. Perhaps *Ivan Ilych*, which is famous for its psychological depth, will help you understand what many people go through when they're dying. Perhaps *Ivan Ilych* will also get you thinking about what mortality means *for you*. Like Ivan, you might start wondering how you should live your life, and how you can find

2 About the author:

On August 28, 1828 Leo Tolstoy was born into a wealthy aristocratic family that resided at a country estate called Yasnaya Polyana, about 120 miles south of Moscow. Death visited the Tolstoy family early. When Tolstoy was only two, his mother died while giving birth to her fifth child. And Tolstoy's father followed suddenly in 1837. Orphaned but well off, Tolstoy was cared for by a succession of female relatives until he attained his maturity in 1848. Although he attended Kazan University for three years, he never completed a degree, choosing instead to return to Yasnaya Polyana to take up permanent residence.

The life of a wealthy Russian master was not for him, however, and in 1851 he joined his brother on active duty with the Russian army. It was during his tour of duty that Tolstoy published his first work, *Childhood,* an account of the life and experiences of a young boy. The novel garnered him immediate literary recognition. His celebrity status only grew throughout subsequent years as he published more stories and completed two sequels to *Childhood*: *Boyhood* and *Youth.* Yet in 1859, disillusioned with his calling as a writer, Tolstoy returned to Yasnaya Polyana where he devoted himself to estate management and the study of educational practices. In 1862 Tolstoy married Sofia Andreevna Bers and seven

years later, in 1869, published his epic work, *War and Peace. Anna Karenina,* the second long novel on which Tolstoy's fame as a writer is mainly based, followed in 1877.

From 1875–1878 Tolstoy experienced a period of increasing depression and psychological crisis that was to alter both his philosophy and his art. In *A Confession,* an autobiographical account of his life and moral struggle written after the crisis, Tolstoy writes that the principal cause of his depression was his inability to find an acceptable meaning in human life. The inevitability of death overwhelmed him, and all formulations of life's meaning appeared to him shallow and valueless. Neither the great philosophers of the past nor his contemporaries could provide him with satisfying answers. Desperate, he turned to the Russian people. Tolstoy found that the uneducated peasants possessed a definite conception of the meaning of a life, a comfort and security derived from "irrational knowledge," from faith in a creator God. This faith rescued them from despair and suffering and infused their life with meaning. Confronted with the choice of irrational faith or meaningless despair, Tolstoy chose faith. At first attempting to renew contact with the church of his childhood, Tolstoy eventually resolved to develop his own system of belief. And devoting the four years after his crisis (1878–1882) to that purpose, Tolstoy published a series of four works elaborating upon and explaining his unique religious philosophy, works that Tolstoy regarded as his most important achievement as a writer.

It is not insignificant that *The Death of Ivan Ilych,* written in 1886, was the first major fictional work published by Tolstoy after his crisis and conversion. Tolstoy's religious philosophy serves as a background to the understanding of the novel. Brotherly love, mutual support, and Christian charity, values that became essential to Tolstoy in the second half of his life, emerge as the dominant moral principles in *The Death of Ivan Ilych.* And just as Tolstoy's discovery of the true meaning of life led him to fulfillment and an acceptance of death, so too, Ivan Ilych's awakening exposes him to the light of a meaningful life and assuages his fear of dying. Thus, *The Death of Ivan Ilych* can be seen as a reflection and an elaboration of Tolstoy's post- conversion philosophical concerns. The novel is a fictional answer to the questions that plagued Tolstoy during the mid 1870s.

From the time of his conversion to his death, Tolstoy remained actively engaged in publicizing his religious beliefs. He wrote various pieces on social, political, and economic topics ranging from vegetarianism to capital punishment. In hopeless opposition to the

government, nearly all of his writings were censored or banned. Tolstoy died in 1910 after nearly a decade of continuing ill health.

3 Summary:

he Death of Ivan Ilych begins at the chronological end of the story. A group of judges are gathered together in a private room of the courthouse when Peter Ivanovich, a judge and close friend of Ivan Ilych, announces that Ivan has died. Consoled by the thought that it is Ivan who has died and not them, the men in the room cannot help but think of the promotions and transfers that Ivan's death will occasion. That evening, Peter drives to Ivan's house to attend his funeral. But while looking at Ivan's corpse, Peter is bothered by an expression of disapproval and warning on Ivan's face. Ivan's wife Praskovya quizzes Peter about possible strategies to maximize her dead husband's government pension. On his way out, Peter encounters Gerasim, Ivan's sick nurse. Peter mentions that Ivan's death and funeral are a sad affair, and Gerasim surprises Peter with the observation that everyone dies some day.

The story then shifts more than thirty years into the past and picks up with a description of Ivan's life. Ivan is the second of three sons, and in all respects is an average and commonplace person. Around the age of thirteen he attends the School of Law where he assimilates the values and behavior of those with high social standing. Ivan becomes an examining magistrate in the reformed judicial institutions and moves to a new province. Ivan marries and things progress smoothly until Praskovya becomes pregnant. As Praskovya's behavior begins to disrupt the proper and decorous lifestyle cherished by Ivan and approved by society, Ivan increasingly absorbs himself in his official work and distances himself from his family. At work he prides himself on removing all personal concerns from his consideration, and at home he adopts a formal attitude toward his family. Time passes and Ivan moves up in the ranks. He expects to be awarded the post of presiding judge in a University town, but is passed over for promotion. Infuriated and struck by a keen sense of injustice, Ivan obtains a leave of absence and moves with his family to his brother-in-law's house in the country. Conscious that his salary cannot cover his family's living expenses, Ivan travels to St. Petersburg to look for a higher paying job. He learns that due to a change in the administration of the Ministry of Justice, a close friend has landed a position of great authority. Ivan is awarded a higher paying position in the city, and informing his family of the good news, Ivan departs alone to buy and furnish a house in preparation for the family's arrival. One day as he is mounting a step-ladder to hang some drapes, he makes a false step

and slips, banging his side against the window frame. The injury is not serious, however, and Ivan is quite pleased with the final appearance of the house. He settles into his new life and acquires a love of bridge.

Ivan begins to experience some discomfort in his left side and an unusual taste in his mouth. The discomfort gradually increases and soon Ivan is both irritable and quarrelsome. The doctors Ivan visits all disagree on the nature of the illness, and Ivan becomes depressed and fearful. Even cards lose their appeal. Ivan's physical condition degenerates rapidly. One night while lying alone in the dark, he is visited by his first thoughts of mortality, and they terrify him. He realizes that his illness is not a question of health or disease, but of life or death. Praskovya does not understand nor wish to understand her husband's plight, and Ivan can barely suppress his hatred for her. Ivan knows that he is dying, but he is unable to grasp the full implications of his mortality. He tries to erect screens to block the thought of death from his mind, but death haunts him ceaselessly. In the midst of this suffering, Gerasim, Ivan's peasant servant, enters the scene. Assigned the task of helping Ivan with his excretions, Gerasim soon begins passing the entire night with the dying man. To ease his pain, Gerasim supports Ivan's legs on his shoulders. More than any other living person, Gerasim provides Ivan with the compassion and honesty that he needs. Ivan's daily routine is monotonous and maddening. As those around him continue to pretend that he is only sick and not dying, Ivan feels that he is surrounded by artificiality. No one wants to confront the fact of Ivan's imminent death. Ivan becomes silently enraged, and seeing his little son Vasya, Ivan realizes that Vasya is the only one besides Gerasim who understands him. That night Ivan dreams of a deep black sack. He is being violently pushed into the sack, but cannot fall through. And he both fears and desires to fall into it. Awaking from his dream, Ivan sends Gerasim away, and for the first time he hears the inner voice of his soul speaking to him. Twelve more days pass, and Ivan is no longer able to leave the sofa. He lies pondering death and questioning the rationale behind his suffering. As he examines his life, Ivan realizes that the further back he looks, the more joy there is. He finds that just as the pain grew worse and worse, so too did his life. He knows that an explanation for the suffering would be possible if he had not lived rightly, but recalling the propriety of his life, he resigns himself to the senselessness of death. Then, one night while looking at Gerasim's face, Ivan begins to doubt whether he has lived his life correctly. He imagines the black sack again, and the immense agony he experiences stems partly from his being thrust into the sack, and partly from not being able to get right into it. The conviction that his life was a good one prevents him from entering the sack, but

for some reason he is unwilling to relinquish that belief. Suddenly, "some force" strikes Ivan in the chest and side. It pushes him through the sack and into the presence of a bright light. At that very moment his hand falls on his sons head and he feels sorry for him. His wife approaches his bed, her face wet with tears, and he feels sorry for her too. He realizes that his official life and his family and social relations were all artificial. And he experiences a sense of extreme joy. In the middle of a sigh, Ivan stretches out and dies.

4 Analysis:

Chapter 1

The Death of Ivan Ilych begins at the chronological end of the story. During an interval in an ongoing court case, a group of judges gathers together in a private room. The conversation turns to the Krasovski case, a well-known trial of the 1880s, and a discussion ensues about whether the case is subject to the judges' jurisdiction. The discussion is interrupted when Peter Ivanovich, Ivan's closest acquaintance and a judge who chose to tread the newspaper rather than engage in the discussion, announces that Ivan Ilych has died. The funeral notice, surrounded by a black border, reports with typical formality both the time of death and the time of the funeral. Although Ivan Ilych was a well-liked and agreeable colleague of the men in the room, their first thought upon hearing the news of his death was of "the changes and promotions it might occasion among themselves or their acquaintances." Peter realizes that it might now be a good time to apply for his brother-in-law's transfer from a provincial city. The serious topic of Ivan's death is broached only for a moment, and is quickly replaced by trivialities. Along with thoughts of transfer and promotion, the death of a near acquaintance arouses in the men the "complacent" feeling that "it is he who is dead and not I." And Ivan Ilych's closer acquaintances, his "so-called friends," cannot help but feel burdened by the tedious demands of propriety: attending Ivan's funeral and paying a visit of condolence to the widow.

After telling his wife of Ivan's death and the possibility of getting her brother transferred, Peter Ivanovich sacrifices his usual nap and drives to Ivan's house. He enters and notices a coffin-lid against the wall. At the top of the stairs, Peter sees his colleague Schwartz, who winks at him playfully. Peter understands by Schwartz's mannerisms that he wants to arrange the location of their evening game of bridge. Schwartz makes a silent gesture toward the room where Ivan's body lies, and Peter enters feeling uncertain about how to conduct himself.

Knowing that a failsafe response on such occasions is to cross oneself, yet unsure if he should bow while doing so, Peter adopts a middle course. He begins crossing himself repeatedly while making a slight movement resembling a bow. When it seems to him that the repetitive motion has gone on too long, he stops and begins to look at the corpse. The face of the corpse wears a fulfilled expression, "as if what was necessary had been accomplished, and accomplished rightly." At the same time, however, it wears an expression of disapproval, as if offering a warning to the living. The warning seems especially discomforting and inapplicable to Peter, and he hurriedly leaves the room, regardless of propriety. In the adjoining room Peter runs into Schwartz, and Schwartz's elegant figure and playful personality, somehow above such depressing influences as death, immediately rejuvenate him. Schwartz whispers to Peter that such an incident as a church service should not pose an obstacle to them spending the evening agreeably, i.e., to them playing bridge. But just at that moment, Praskovya Fedorovna (Ivan's widow), emerges from her room, recognizes Peter, and asks to speak to him privately before the church service begins. She leads him to an inner drawing room, elaborately upholstered and full of furniture and knick-knacks. Peter remembers the care with which Ivan arranged this room, and recalls being consulted about the upholstery. As Peter seats himself on a low pouffe with spasmodic springs, Praskovya considers warning him to take another seat, but changes her mind when she realizes that such a warning would be inappropriate in her present condition. On her way toward the sofa, she catches her shawl on a carved table edge. Peter rises to detach it, but the springs of the pouffe, relived of his weight, rise also and push him forward. The widow begins detaching the shawl herself, and Peter sits down once again on the pouffe, "suppressing the rebellious springs." Yet the widow has still not managed to free herself. And Peter, amid the creaks and groans of the pouffe, rises again to help her detach the shawl. After the episode, the widow takes out a "clean cambric" handkerchief and begins to weep.

Ivan's butler enters the room to report to Praskovya the price of Ivan's plot in the cemetery (220 rubles), and Peter overhears her inquiring into the prices of different plots. Having asked Peter to smoke several moments before, and noticing now that his cigarette ash is endangering the table, she passes him an ashtray. Praskovya then turns the conversation to Ivan's death. She mentions that he screamed incessantly for the last three days, an ordeal, she relates, that caused her unbelievable suffering. The thought of Ivan's suffering strikes Peter with horror, "despite an unpleasant consciousness of his own and this woman's dissimulation." The image of Ivan's face with its warning once again rises to Peter's mind,

and he begins to feel afraid for himself. Yet the thought that it was Ivan who had died and not him, along with the image of Schwartz's resiliency and resistance to depression, reassures Peter and assuages his fear.

After some more talk of Ivan's suffering, Praskovya gets down to business and begins probing Peter about possible strategies to squeeze the most possible money out of the government on the occasion of her husband's death. Finding Peter unable to devise a plan to obtain more money, she searches for a way to politely dismiss her visitor. Noticing this, Peter leaves the room. Just as he is about to pass into the death-chamber, Peter notices Ivan's son emerging from under the stairs. Peter then enters the death-chamber, sits through the service while managing to resist any depressing influence, and is one of the first to leave the room when the service ends. In the anteroom, Gerasim (the butler's assistant, and Ivan's sick nurse) helps Peter with his coat. When Peter mentions that the death and funeral are a sad affair, Gerasim responds, "It's God's will. We shall all come to it some day." Once outside, Peter feels refreshed by the cool air. He gets in his sledge, drives to meet Schwartz, and arrives at an opportune time to join the card game.

Analysis

Tolstoy's placement of the chronologically final chapter at the beginning of the work is significant for several reasons. It not only provides an intimate view of the social milieu that Ivan Ilych occupied and left behind, it also established contrasting attitudes toward death and highlights the major themes of the novel. It is clear from the outset that Tolstoy is highly critical of the life and values of the late nineteenth-century Russian bourgeoisie. He satirizes the lack of authenticity, the selfishness, and the hypocrisy of upper class human relationships. When Ivan's colleagues and friends learn of his death, their first thought is of how they can turn Ivan's vacant position to their benefit. Promotion not pity is their first concern. Even Peter, who has known Ivan since childhood and feels "obliged" to him, sees Ivan's death as instrumental to the achievement of his interests. Attending Ivan's funeral and paying a visit of condolence to the widow are seen by Ivan's friends as demands of propriety, and not as opportunities to pay one's last respects and to comfort the grieving. Yet for the members of Ivan's society, even grieving is an inauthentic mask. Conduct is governed by propriety and convention. Individuals act as they should, not as they feel.

The falseness of relations, the insincerity of interaction, and the primacy of self-interest are mercilessly satirized by Tolstoy, and revealed as inadequate and ultimately unfulfilling. Tolstoy's elaborate description of Peter's crossing-bowing routine on entering the death-chamber highlights the falseness of behavior that adheres to standards of propriety and decorum. Praskovya Fedorovna invites Peter into her drawing room not for mutual comfort, but to find out how to maximize her husbands' government pension. Materialism impedes human connection. And the knick-knacks, furniture, and elaborate upholstery that have such a dominant presence in the drawing-room substitute for and provide obstacles to sincere communication. Recall how Praskovya's shawl is snagged by the ornately carved table edge. It is clear the chapter I, in part, serves as an attack on the empty and valueless life of the society of which Ivan was a part.

Another principal function of chapter I is to establish contrasting attitudes toward death or mortality. For the group of judges that gather together in the beginning of the novel, the serious topic of Ivan's death is the subject of discussion for only a matter of moments before it is replaced by the trivial topic of distances between city regions. And the general unwillingness to consider death, to confront one's own mortality, is characteristic of all the members of Ivan's society, from Schwartz to Praskovya to Peter himself. Essentially, Peter's attitude toward death can be seen as fluctuating between the solemn and concerned (as expressed and evoked by Ivan's countenance) and the playful and relieved (as expressed and evoked by Schwartz's countenance).

Several times in the chapter Peter finds himself in a position to confront the prospect of death, and thus, the meaning of life. When Peter first looks at the corpse and notices the fulfilled yet admonishing expression on Ivan's face, when Peter talks with Praskovya about Ivan's suffering, and when Gerasim mentions the inevitability of death, Peter is presented with the opportunity to comprehend the significance of Ivan's death, to step outside of the socially accepted perspective. Yet each time Peter is about to cross over, to consider what is truly important, either the playful attitude of Schwartz, or the socially conditioned response that, "it is he who died and not me," brings him back. Thus, characteristic of Ivan's society is the habit of adopting an attitude toward life that disregards the unpleasantness of life. The members of Ivan's society cannot comprehend their own death, and thus, they can have no understanding of the meaning of life.

Chapter 2:

Ivan Ilych is an unexceptional, commonplace, nondescript man. His life is "most simple and most ordinary and therefore most terrible." The child of a "superfluous" member of superfluous government institutions, Ivan is the middle of three sons. He is neither as cold and formal as his older brother, nor as wild and reckless as his younger brother. He is a "happy mean" between the two, *le phenix de la famille.*

Around the age of thirteen, Ivan enters the School of Law. A sociable, agreeable, and proper student, Ivan is strict in the fulfillment of his duty, his duty understood as the dictates of those in authority. From early on, he is attracted to people of high social standing as a "fly is drawn to the light." He assimilates their values, behavior, and views on life. When he graduates from the School of Law, Ivan makes the conventional purchases of clothes and luggage, including a medallion inscribed with the motto *respice finem,* look to the end, and he sets out for his first position as an official for a provincial governor.

In the province, Ivan's life is pleasant and decorous. He performs his professional duties with exactness, and even his affairs and carousals are carried on with a "tone of good breeding." Ivan remains in the province for five years until the Russian governmental reforms of the 1860s create the demand for "new men." Ivan becomes just such a new man, accepting a post as examining magistrate in the reformed judicial institution, and moving to a new province.

In his new post, Ivan operates just as properly and decorously as before, always ensuring to exclude his personal opinion from his professional duties. He acquires the ability to reduce even the most complicated case to "a form in which it would be presented on paper only in its externals." His social life picks up where it left off. He finds the best circle of "legal gentleman" to associate with, and begins playing vint, a form of bridge. After two years in the province, Ivan meets Praskovya Fedorovna. Praskovya comes from a good family, is not unattractive, and has a little property. Although Ivan had no definite intention of marrying, and although he did not quite fall in love with Praskovya, he decides to marry her in part because his superiors consider it the right thing to do.

The early stages of married life are pleasant and easy, and life is proceeding decorously for Ivan until his wife becomes pregnant. From the first months of Praskovya's pregnancy, something "unpleasant, depressing, and unseemly" begins to show itself. Praskovya's behavior changes. She becomes moody, demanding, and jealous. Ivan gradually comes to realize that marriage is not always "conducive to the pleasures and amenities of life." In an

attempt to secure his own independence, to escape from the unpleasantness, Ivan transfers more and more of his attention to his professional life. In order to lead a life approved by society, Ivan finds it necessary to adopt a formal attitude toward marriage. He begins to require only the conveniences of dinner, housewife, and bed. After three years in the province Ivan is promoted to Assistant Public Prosecutor. Four years later, he is transferred to another province as Public Prosecutor. In the new province, Ivan's marriage problems continue. He spends increasingly less time with his family, and invites company to visit whenever he must be at home. In this way, with the majority of his attention focused on work, chats and dinners with his colleagues, and bridge, Ivan's life continues to follow its pleasant course. Seven more years pass. A child dies. And Ivan's youngest son is ready to enter school.

Analysis

Tolstoy is at pains to create Ivan as Everyman. He wants to connect Ivan, his thoughts, and concerns with a general audience, so that the reader feels, if not a sympathetic association, at least a mild identification. Ivan is the middle of three sons; he has the middle temperament of the three, and is, generally speaking, the "happy mean."

From this description, it is evident that Ivan's life proceeds by a kind of balance, or moderation, prescribed by his social superiors. Indeed, propriety and decorum emerge as virtual leitmotifs of Ivan's life. He chooses his friends based upon their social standing. He decides to marry because it is considered the right thing to do. His conduct and worldview are wholly determined by the opinions and expectations of the elite class. Given our knowledge of the life and values of the Russian bourgeoisie as related in Chapter I, the metaphor Tolstoy employs to describe Ivan's relationship to his social superiors—that of a fly being drawn to a bright light—is especially fitting. Just as a fly's direction of flight is determined by the location and placement of the light, so too is Ivan's movement through the social world dictated by the concerns of his social superiors. Yet the metaphor works on an even deeper level. In Tolstoy's day, the light that attracted flies was a burning flame. When the flies reached it, they were instantly killed. This implies that Ivan, by conforming his conduct to the opinions of the upper class, is moving closer and closer to the flame that will burn him alive. Bourgeois society is the metaphorical bright light.

Throughout Chapter II, Tolstoy makes use of several foreign-language expressions that seem to operate on two levels. Referring to Ivan as *le phenix de la famille* could mean that he is the

member of the family most likely to succeed, or it could foreshadow an eventual rebirth on Ivan's part, a rising up from the ashes after the burning death caused by society, much like the mythical phoenix that was reborn from the ashes of its own destruction. Similarly, the motto inscribed on his medallion *respice finem,* meaning "look to the end," could be both a helpful suggestion for a future lawyer to focus on the outcome, or a warning for a man traveling down the wrong life path to prepare himself for death.

Ivan's unwillingness to concern himself with the unpleasant, a theme that emerged with his peers in Chapter I, now establishes itself as a defining characteristic of Ivan's personality. Ivan becomes adept at establishing barriers and closing himself off from the unseemly and indecorous aspects of life. He retreats from his wife during her pregnancy when her behavior introduces something "unseemly" and "depressing" into his life. He absorbs himself in official work, isolating himself from the demands of a family. Ivan adopts a formal attitude to married life. In a manner reminiscent of his professional behavior, he begins to see marriage in contractual terms, requiring only the conveniences of dinner, housewife, and bed. He maintains a safe distance from his wife and family by inviting guests whenever he is obliged to be at home. Like Peter Ivanovich and Schwartz, Ivan begins to play cards, no doubt a needed diversion. Ivan's professional ability to reduce complicated cases to mere forms on paper, to deal with potentially emotional and personal situations in terms of cold externals, is reflected in all aspects of his life. One wonders whether Ivan will succeed in making of his own life a mere form. We must recall the funeral notice in Chapter I, a mere form on paper that announces Ivan's death. With his professional life strictly professional, and his personal life far from personal, one begins to wonder which of Ivan's lives, if either, is truly real. Thus, by the end of Chapter II, it becomes clear that by beginning to close himself off, Ivan is closing himself off from everything, including life itself.

Chapter 3:

The year is 1880. Seventeen years have passed since the end of the previous chapter. Ivan is now a Public Prosecutor of long standing, able to decline proposed transfers until a desirable position comes along. Expecting to be awarded the post of presiding judge in a University town, however, Ivan's pleasant life is interrupted when he is passed over for the promotion. Ivan becomes angry. He quarrels with Happe (the man awarded the post) and his immediate superiors, but Ivan's behavior only further distances him from his superiors. Realizing that his salary is not enough to cover his family's living expenses and burdened by the injustice done

him, Ivan obtains a leave of absence. He moves with his family to a country house owned by his wife's brother.

Dissatisfied with and depressed by his lifestyle, Ivan decides to travel to St. Petersburg to find a higher paying position and to punish those that failed to appreciate him. On his way to St. Petersburg, Ivan learns of a sudden change in the administration of the Ministry of Justice. A close friend of Ivan's has come into a position of great authority, and Ivan is now assured of receiving an appointment. Ivan is awarded a higher paying position in his former Department of Justice, and he now finds himself two stages above his old colleagues. Thrilled by his promotion and with no hard feelings toward his former enemies, Ivan returns to the country to share the news with Praskovya. Ivan is pleased to see his life resume its agreeable course, and relations between him and his wife improve. Soon after, Ivan departs on his own to take up his official duties and to make the necessary living arrangements before his family follows. He finds a "delightful" house in St. Petersburg and absorbs himself, even at the expense of his official work, with giving it a particular aristocratic character. As Ivan acquires the characteristic furnishings, he begins to note that the house is approaching the ideal he had set for himself.

One day as he is mounting a stepladder to hang some drapes, he makes a false step and slips, banging his side against the window frame. The bruised place is painful but soon passes, and Ivan feels fifteen years younger. Although Ivan is charmed by the final appearance of his house, "in reality it was just what is usually seen in the houses of people of moderate means who want to appear rich, and therefore succeed only in resembling others like them." Ivan's family comes to live in the house, and things go particularly well. Occasionally Ivan becomes irritated when he finds a spot on the tablecloth or a broken window-blind string.

In Ivan's official business he admits only "official relations with people, and then only on official grounds." He also possesses the ability to separate his real life from his official life and not to mix the two. He and Praskovya take pleasure in holding occasional dinners from men and women of good social position. But Ivan's greatest pleasure is playing bridge. Whatever disagreeable event occurs in his life, Ivan can always sit down to bridge, to "the pleasure that beamed like a ray of light." A promising young man is courting Ivan's daughter, and life is flowing pleasantly.

Analysis

Just as Ivan retreated from the unpleasantness introduced by Praskovya's pregnancy, so too, when Ivan is passed over for promotion and finds that official complaints make the matter worse, he chooses to abandon his official post to seek another. The great sense of injustice that Ivan feels over the situation reveals his expectation that life, or official life at the least, should follow clear, simple, and proper conventions. And it would seem that this incursion of unpleasantness into Ivan's official refuge would signal to him that reality, or real life, was of a different nature than the semblance of propriety, predictability, and decorum that Ivan has created for himself. Yet Ivan is able to overlook this incongruity and to maintain his worldview when his friend's unexpected promotion lands him a new, higher paying position. Ivan disregards the fact that the pleasant course of his life is resumed purely by chance, and he maintains the illusion that his life is predictable and solid, capable of being shaped wholly by his own power.

When Ivan's new home furnishings begin to give his house an aristocratic, refined and elegant appearance, Tolstoy's phrase that "everything progressed and approached the ideal he had set himself," is reminiscent of the image of the fly approaching the bright light, noted in Chapter II. A peculiar bourgeois materialism manifests itself in Ivan's obsession with decorating his house. He envisions its splendor and admires its appropriateness before falling asleep. He deliberates about the shape of his cornices while in court sessions. It is clear that by bringing his home, a true status symbol, into line with the expectations and standards of the members of high society, Ivan is truly becoming a part of that society. He is reaching the highest rungs of the social ladder.

Given his rise in social status, Ivan's fall from the stepladder, therefore, is especially symbolic. Considering the fact that Ivan's fall is the apparent physical cause of the illness that leads to his death, Tolstoy seems to be hinting that Ivan's conformity to the views of high society will have dire consequences. The fact that Ivan was hanging drapes when he fell from the ladder adds another layer of significance to the event. Given that drapes function to enclose and shut out, Ivan's fall while attempting to hang them may point toward the potentially fatal effects of voluntary self-isolation from the world.

A close look at Ivan's different roles in society reveals that in each of Ivan's roles, he reduces life to an orderly and predictable, yet formal and impersonal, simulation of reality. In his official life as a judge he conducts formal relations with people, excluding everything "fresh and vital." In his social life as father and family man he maintains critical distance by means

of formal contacts with guests of the "best society." And in his bridge-playing life as one of four "not noisy partners," he revels in the serious, clever, and congruent nature of the well-played game. Ivan ignores all of the messy and "unseemly" aspects of life. We begin to wonder where Ivan really lives, or if he truly lives at all.

Chapter 4:

Ivan begins to experience some discomfort in his left side and an unusual taste in his mouth. The discomfort gradually increases and soon Ivan is both irritable and quarrelsome. As his ill humor begins to mar the easy and agreeable lifestyle he has worked so hard to construct, volatile disputes with his wife occur more and more often. Praskovya, "with characteristic exaggeration," comments that Ivan has always had a dreadful temper. Ivan now starts all the arguments. Realizing that her husband's uncontrollable rages are making her life miserable, Praskovya begins to feel sorry for herself. She hates Ivan and would like to see him die, if only his salary would not cease.

One day Ivan goes to see the doctor. At the doctor's office Ivan is struck by the similarity between his attitude toward the accused in the law courts and the doctors attitude toward him. To Ivan, the only important question is whether or not his case is serious. But ignoring Ivan's concern, the doctor focuses on the strictly medical question of whether Ivan's problem is a floating kidney or appendicitis. This question the doctor answers brilliantly, and as Ivan thinks, in favor of the appendix. Ivan gets the feeling that his case is very serious and he is struck by the doctor's indifference and utter lack of sympathy to a matter of such importance.

Ivan heads home, depressed and fearful. He begins to tell his wife about the examination, but before he can finish, his wife leaves with their daughter to go out. Ivan takes medicine and strictly follows the doctor's orders, but more tests reveal that the doctor's initial prognosis was incorrect. Ivan then attempts to deal with his sickness by forcing himself to think that he has gotten better, but any unpleasantness with his wife, lack of success in work, or bad cards at bridge bring to mind his disease. Ivan goes to see more doctors, including a homeopath, but each doctor diagnoses his illness differently from the others. Ivan becomes annoyed with himself one day when he starts to believe that a wonder-working icon can affect miracles.

Ivan realizes that those around him think everything is normal, and do not understand nor care to understand his condition. Ivan's wife and daughter are annoyed at his depression and

intolerance. Praskovya adopts a formal attitude to Ivan's illness. It consists of the beliefs that Ivan's condition is his own fault and that if he strictly follows doctor's orders he will improve.

At the law courts Ivan notices people looking at him inquisitively as if his post might soon be vacant. At other times, his friends, and especially Schwartz, joke about his illness as if it were a trivial and temporary condition. Even card playing ceases to hold its previous allure. One night when playing bridge with friends, Ivan is on the verge of making a grand slam. Suddenly, he becomes aware of the pain in his side and the disagreeable taste in his mouth, and it seems ridiculous to him that he should derive pleasure from a grand slam. Ivan misplays the hand and misses the grand slam. And despite his partner's distress, Ivan realizes that he does not care, "and it was dreadful to realize why he did not care." Conscious that his life is "poisoned" and is poisoning the lives of others, he feels alone on the "brink of an abyss," with no one who understands or pities him.

Analysis

The symptoms that mark the onset of Ivan's illness coincide curiously with the symptoms ascribed to Praskovya during her pregnancy, i.e., fits of anger, a strange taste in the mouth, and a tendency to disrupt the pleasant and easy course of life. And just as Praskovya's symptoms were the result of burgeoning life, so too, the sickness that is causing Ivan's physical death seems somehow associated with growing new life. It is interesting to note that Praskovya's reaction to Ivan's sickness mirrors Ivan's reaction to the unpleasantness introduced by Praskovya's pregnancy. Praskovya sees Ivan's condition as an unseemly burden. She minimizes the amount of time spent in his company and retreats from him as soon as an occasion arises. Recall Praskvoya's hasty departure in the middle of her husband's account of his visit to the doctor. Reminiscent of Ivan's formal attitude toward marriage, Praskovya adopts a "definite line in regard to his illness." Even Ivan's colleagues at work maintain a nonchalant and superficial attitude toward Ivan's illness. Tolstoy seems to imply that for Praskovya and Ivan, as well as for bourgeois society as a whole, formal and concrete attitudes toward life replace sympathetic and emotional connections.

This conclusion is only strengthened by Ivan's visit to the doctor. The doctor treats Ivan just as he treats the petitioners that come before him in court, in a coldly external, detached, and formalized manner. Ivan is principally concerned with whether or not his illness is life threatening. He wants to know the individual significance of his condition. But the doctor

cannot engage Ivan on a personal level, he can only comment on the formal, medical aspects of his patient's case. Just as the doctor's focus is of secondary importance to Ivan, when the diagnoses of other doctors come into conflict with one another, one begins to wonder whether the physiological approach itself is of secondary importance. We are left with the impression that Ivan's condition is more than just a physiological problem.

Ivan's attempts to deal with the disruption caused by his illness are also revealing. By following the doctor's orders in a scrupulous and exact fashion, he not only takes up the position that his illness is purely physiological, but he also demonstrates his belief that life is well regulated and predictable. With Praskovya's pregnancy, Ivan managed to adopt a perspective that ignored the disagreeable aspects of her behavior. And when the proper channels of complaint failed to gain Ivan notice when he was passed over for promotion, a sudden and miraculous reorganization of the government landed him a better position. Yet unlike the previous incursions of unseemliness and unpredictability into his life, Ivan's illness resists such decorum restoring measures. When meticulous attention to the doctor's instructions fails to help, Ivan tries to force himself to think that he is better. But even self-deception is unsuccessful when problems with his wife, difficulty at work, or bad cards at bridge make him conscious of his disease.

The fact that life's unpleasantness causes the pain that Ivan experiences is a key to Ivan's condition. If Ivan's condition is not physiological, but is truly caused by a misperception of the nature of life, i.e., if Ivan's illness stems from his belief that life is always proper, formal, decorous, and neat, then any signs to the contrary would serve to aggravate his symptoms. A close look at Ivan's night of bridge seems to point to the same conclusion. Ivan enjoys bridge because it mirrors his perception of reality. Bridge, in a sense, is a metaphor for Ivan's ideal of a proper life. Thus, when Ivan realizes that his excitement at making a grand slam (the best possible bridge hand) is ridiculous in light of his present condition, bridge seems to lose all its appeal. Ivan's illness makes him conscious of the fact that bridge does not reflect the true nature of life. Missing a grand slam, as Ivan does when he misplays his hand, is really a trivial occurrence. Ivan simply does not care. And the reason that "it is dreadful to realize" why he does not care is because that realization implies the destruction of his worldview. Although Ivan has not yet completely relinquished his view of life as neat and predictable, his illness is gradually making him aware that a world and a reality exist outside of the one he occupies.

Chapter 5:

Upon arriving home from work one day, Ivan encounters his brother-in-law unpacking his suitcase. His brother-in-law's utterly surprised expression at seeing Ivan's face reveals to him the true state of his physical degeneration. Taking a portrait of him and his wife, Ivan compares it to the image he sees in the mirror. He is horrified by the change in his appearance. Ivan overhears a private conversation between Praskovya and her brother in which the visitor refers to him as a "dead man." Ivan decides to see one final doctor, and after learning that the problem is a "small thing" with his vermiform appendix that can be righted if he only stimulates the activity of one organ and checks the activity of another, he returns home feeling somewhat better.

After dinner he returns to his study, but is bothered by the consciousness that he has put aside an "intimate matter" which he would return to when his official work is done. Later, he remembers that this matter is the thought of his vermiform appendix. After tea with some company, Ivan turns in for the night. While lying in bed, Ivan falls into deep thought. He visualizes his vermiform appendix, imagines the desired improvement, and begins to feel a little better. But suddenly, the familiar pain in his side and the "loathsome taste" in his mouth return. He comes to the conclusion that it is not a question of his appendix, but a question of life or death.

Visited by the first thoughts of his own mortality, a chill comes over him and his breathing ceases. He jumps up and tries to light a candle, but it falls from his hands to the floor. He hears the noise from the company outside his room and grows angry and even more miserable. To calm himself, he tries to think over the onset of his illness from the very beginning. But as thoughts of death crowd in, terror seizes him. He overturns the bedside stand while grasping for matches, falls to his bed in despair, expecting death at any moment. Praskovya, hearing the noise, comes to investigate. She lights a candle and asks if anything is wrong, but not understanding Ivan's circumstance, she leaves to see her guests off. Several minutes later she returns. While Praskovya is kissing Ivan on the forehead and wishing him goodnight, Ivan barely manages to suppress his hatred for her.

Analysis

This chapter marks an interesting shift in the narrative strategy of the novel. Up to this point, the narrator has described Ivan's situation from the outside, relating his actions and feelings from a distance. Now, however, the narrator begins to describe Ivan's situation by reporting his thought processes and mental reflections directly. The narrator closes the distance between the audience and Ivan by providing a glimpse of Ivan's internal dialogue. The absence of such internal dialogue prior to Chapter V seems to suggest that Ivan lacked (or was unaware of) an inner life. The prevalence of internal dialogue after Chapter V suggests that here Ivan is slowly becoming aware of an inner life.

The narrator reveals Ivan's growing awareness of a private world separate from the external one of daily activity by introducing Ivan's consciousness of an important, "intimate matter." The fact that he can only turn his attention to this matter when his official work is done reinforces the mutually exclusive nature of the two worlds. Yet when Ivan remembers that this private matter is nothing more than the thought of his appendix, it is clear that Ivan's understanding of his inner world is still severely limited. Once again, that understanding, or misunderstanding, is called into question by the pain and suffering brought on by his illness.

Chapter 6:

Ivan knows that he is dying, but he is unable to grasp the full implications of his mortality. He knows that the syllogism from Kieswetter's Logic, "Caius is a man, men are mortal, therefore Caius is mortal," applies perfectly to Caius, an abstract man. He cannot see how the syllogism applies to him, a concrete man. If he was to die, he reasons, an inner voice would have told him so. As Ivan begins to recall certain childhood memories, he is struck by a sense of his own individuality and the incomprehensibility of his death. He recalls the smell of his striped leather ball, kissing his mother's hand, hearing the rustle of her silk dress. To screen the thought of death from him, he tries to fall back into his former habit of thought, but finds that "all that had formerly shut off, hidden, and destroyed his consciousness of death, no longer had that effect." He tries to erect "new screens" to block that consciousness, but the consciousness penetrates them all.

One day, while moving something in the drawing room, Ivan sees Death looking at him from behind some flowers. He goes to his study and lies down. But Ivan is unable to escape Death. He can only look at it and shudder.

Analysis

Ivan's inability to come to terms with his mortality by means of logic is understandable. Logic serves to remove everything individual, to deal with cases in terms of generalities. Thus, no personal understanding of death can be reached by focusing on logic. It is fitting that Ivan tries to block his consciousness of death by resuming his old current of thought, and by erecting screens. Yet such escapism, although successful for Ivan's colleagues, is no help to him. Death penetrates every screen that he constructs.

Tolstoy intentionally confuses "death" and "pain" by referring to both with the pronoun "It." This deliberate confusion is effective because it serves to reaffirm the idea that just as Ivan cannot escape pain, so too, he cannot escape death. Pain makes him conscious of death. By the end of Chapter VI, Ivan's death is a foregone conclusion.

Chapter 7:

Ivan Ilych is essentially dead. He awaits only formal removal from the scene. Opium and hypodermic injections of morphine do not relieve his pain. The special foods prepared for him are distasteful and disgusting. He can no longer control his own bodily functions. Yet in the midst of the unpleasantness, Ivan receives his first comfort. Gerasim, the servant from Chapter I, is assigned the task of helping Ivan with his excretions. Gerasim is a "clean, fresh peasant lad, grown stout on town food and always cheerful and bright." He is young, strong, and energetic. Unlike the health and vitality of others, Gerasim's health and vitality do not offend Ivan. One day, as Gerasim is helping Ivan to the sofa, Ivan finds that his pain is much relieved while Gerasim is holding his feet. After that, Ivan frequently asks Gerasim to hold his legs on his shoulders, finding that that position is best of all. Gerasim serves Ivan "easily, willingly, simply, and with a good nature."

More than the physical pain, what begins to torment Ivan most of all is the awful deception of those around him. They use the pretense that he is not dying but is simply ill. As Ivan sees the act of his dying reduced to an unpleasant and indecorous incident, he is bothered by the fact that no one seems to understand his position. Ivan longs to be pitied as a sick child is pitied, to be petted and comforted. But not his wife, nor his daughter, nor his friends can offer Ivan that consolation. Only Gerasim's attitude toward Ivan seems to provide Ivan with what he needs. At times Gerasim supports Ivan's legs all night. Gerasim alone does not lie about the

nature of Ivan's situation. With the words, "We shall all of us die, so why should I grudge a little trouble," Gerasim makes clear to Ivan that he does not consider his work a burden, but a service to a dying man. Moreover, as the falsity around him continues to "poison" his final days, Ivan is only truly comfortable in Gerasim's presence.

Analysis

Tolstoy's moral elevation of Gerasim, a "peasant lad," is both a defiant attack on convention and traditional authority as well as a clear statement about the proper way to live. Not the elite, nor the wealthy, nor the nobles experience the peace and assurance that Gerasim does. Only the peasant servant has no fear of death and no discomfort in dealing with someone who is dying. Gerasim accepts unpleasantness and pain as a part of life. He understands that the world is unpredictable, and he knows the value of sympathy.

Gerasim's qualities temporarily rescue Ivan from his life of isolation and unhappiness. Ivan is cut of from his family, friends, and colleagues not only by their indifference to his predicament but also by his own chosen attitude toward life. Through Gerasim, Ivan renews contact with another human being. He reverses the lifelong process of self-enclosure that has characterized his behavior. It is interesting that Gerasim's contact with Ivan is intimately physical. He not only helps Ivan with his bodily eliminations, he also comforts Ivan by "supporting" Ivan's feet on his own shoulders. This position is strikingly similar to the position of women during childbirth, and Tolstoy may be hinting at a process of spiritual rebirth helped along by Gerasim as a kind of midwife.

In addition to his function as spiritual midwife, Gerasim also represents truthfulness. Gerasim's willingness to admit and accept the fact that Ivan is dying is in contrast to the hypocritical attitude of Ivan's family and friends. By acknowledging that it is death and not illness, Gerasim explodes "the lie" and is able to connect with Ivan on a sympathetic and human level. By the end of the chapter, it is the moral pain caused by "the lie" that torments Ivan most of all. And it is clear that "the lie" carried on by his friends and family is symptomatic of a larger problem plaguing Ivan's society as a whole: the inability to acknowledge the unpleasant aspects of life.

Chapter 8:

Ivan awakes, conscious that morning has come because Gerasim is no longer sitting with him. By now, Ivan's life has become an undifferentiated cycle of suffering, with Death as the only reality. Peter, the footman, enters and begins tidying the room. Ivan is afraid to be alone, and asks Peter to give him his medicine in order to delay Peter's departure. Ivan knows that the medicine is "all tomfoolery," but he takes it anyway.

With Ivan's consent, Peter leaves to bring the morning tea. When he returns, Ivan stares at him for several moments, not realizing who he is. Presently Ivan comes to himself, recognizes Peter, and begins to wash and dress with Peter's help. A doctor comes to visit Ivan, and begins his examination. Ivan knows that it is all nonsense and deception, but he submits to it "as he used to submit to the speeches of the lawyers, though he knew very well they were all lying and why they were lying."

Praskovya enters the room, and her cleanness, glossy hair, and vivacious eyes cause Ivan to feel a thrill of hatred for her. Praskovya's adopted attitude toward Ivan, much like the doctor's relation with his patient, has not changed. When the examination is over, Praskovya announces that she has sent for a celebrated specialist. Saying that she is doing it for her own sake, she lets it be felt that she is doing it solely for Ivan and is only dissembling so as to give him no reason to refuse. Ivan, upon hearing Praskovya, "felt that he was so surrounded and involved in a mesh of falsity that it was hard to unravel anything." He realizes that everything Praskovya does for him is for her own sake, and he finds it incredible that by telling him it is for her own sake Praskovya expects Ivan to think the opposite. The celebrated specialist comes and goes. Ivan is given an injection, and falls asleep until dinner.

After dinner, Praskovya comes into Ivan's room. She is in full evening dress, and Ivan remembers that she and the children are going to the theatre to see Sarah Bernhardt. Ivan's daughter, Lisa, along with her fiancé, Fedor, come into the room; and Vasya, Ivan's son, creeps in behind them. Seeing his son's look of fear and pity, it seems to Ivan that Vasya is the only one besides Gerasim who understands him. A conversation between Praskovya, Lisa, and Fedor springs up about the realism of Sarah Bernhardt's acting, but it is stopped short when they notice Ivan's glittering eyes and indignant expression. As a profound silence fills the room, everyone becomes afraid that the "conventional deception" will be revealed, and that the truth will come out. Lisa is the first to break the silence, and on her suggestion, everybody leaves for the play. When they depart, "the falsity" leaves with them and Ivan feels better.

Analysis

Tolstoy presents a day in the life of the dying protagonist, and along with monotony, artificiality emerges as a dominant motif. Ivan submits to the doctor's examination, knowing the uselessness of the charade, but conforming his actions to the expectations of the situation. The doctor, disregarding the true concerns of his patient, carries on the routine prescribed by his position and his patient's condition. Praskovya, moreover, adopting a line of loving concern, fulfills a wife's obligations to her dying husband despite her true feelings. What is important to realize is that for Ivan and his society, superficiality chokes out honest and direct human interaction. Actual attitudes are covered over by artificial attitudes. Praskovya's loving concern for Ivan is actually hostile impatience for his death. The doctor's routinized medical charade is merely a cover for helplessness. And Ivan's tacit acceptance of the examination ritual is really sardonic disgust. In Ivan's life, individuals are actors. And by associating with the actors, Ivan is drawn into the play, i.e., into the "mesh of falsity."

It is especially fitting that the visit paid to Ivan by his wife, his daughter, and her fiancé occurs before they depart for the theater. The posturing and pretense of the visit is as much a performance as the one they are about to see. The visitors insist on treating Ivan as if he were merely sick instead of dying. Conversation centers on trivial topics, and it is clear that they are paying the visit because propriety calls for their presence. Just as the topic of conversation turns to the "realism" of Sarah Bernhardt's acting, Ivan refuses to act any further. And as the family leaves to attend the play, we realize that Ivan's whole life is a play and that the falseness and artificiality of conventional life has caused his death.

A close look at Chapter VIII in relation to Chapter VII highlights a distinguishing characteristic of Tolstoy's art: the juxtaposition of opposites. Whereas Chapter VIII occurs in the day, Chapter VII occurs at night. While in the day Ivan is met by his wife Praskovya and confronts the health/sickness dichotomy, at night he is met by his servant Gerasim and confronts the life/death dichotomy. This contrast of opposites reveals much about the plan of Tolstoy's work. Ivan's position at this point in the novel is one in which he must choose between these two pairs of opposites, the artificiality and insularity of the "old life" versus the honesty and directness of the "new life."

Chapter 9:

Praskovya returns late from the play and wishes to send Gerasim away, but Ivan opens his eyes and tells Praskovya to leave instead. After taking some opium and while in a state of "stupefied misery," Ivan dreams that he is being pushed into a deep black sack. Although he is being thrust further and further in, he cannot be pushed to the bottom. He both fears and desires to fall into the sack. The movement is accompanied by suffering, and Ivan struggles but also co-operates. Suddenly he breaks through, falls, and wakes up.

He sends Gerasim away, and as soon as the servant leaves the room he begins weeping. In agony he cries out to God, "Why hast Thou done all this? Why has Thou brought me here? Why, why dost Thou torment me so terribly?" Then he grows quiet; he becomes highly attentive and seems to hear a voice speaking from within his soul. "What is it you want?" the voice asks him. Ivan answers that he wants to live well and pleasantly, as he did before. Yet when Ivan begins to call to mind the best moments of his pleasant life, they seem "trivial and often nasty." He reviews the entire course of his life and finds that the further he departed from childhood the more worthless and unfulfilling became his joys. He realizes the lack of goodness in his "deadly official life," and comes to the conclusion that while he was moving up in public opinion, life was ebbing away from him. Finally the thought comes to Ivan that he has not lived his life as he should. But he immediately dismisses that inconceivable thought when he remembers that he did everything "properly" and correctly.

Analysis

By sending his wife away when she comes to sit with him, Ivan symbolically commits himself to the "new life" confronting him. He rejects the artificiality and pretense of his past life, and thereby resolves the tension that had been established in Chapter VIII. In the remaining chapters of the novel, we can expect that Ivan will embark on a process of rebirth in which he will discover the proper attitude toward life, and conquer his fear of death.

Ivan's dream about the black bag supports the prediction that he will soon experience a rebirth. Ivan's attitude toward the bag is ambivalent. He wants to fall into the bag, yet he fears it at the same time. He resists being pushed into it, yet he also cooperates. If the bag is understood as a symbol of death, Ivan's ambivalence becomes clear. He both longs for the reprieve of death and fears relinquishing life. The fact that Ivan breaks through the bag prefigures Ivan's escape from the power of death.

It seems reasonable, however, that the symbol of the bag, much like the story itself, operates on two levels. As well as its function as a symbol of death, the bag also symbolizes a womb, the source of life. The pain and suffering that Ivan experiences while passing through the bag into the light refer to the trauma of birth into new life. The duality of the symbol holds a key to the story. In Ivan's life, what appears like physical death is actually spiritual rebirth, while his old life was the cause of spiritual death. Things are not what they seem, and the action must be read in reverse. Ivan's life was his death, and his death brings new life.

It is interesting to note that upon waking from his dream, Ivan cries out to God in words not dissimilar from those that Jesus used in the Passion narrative of the Gospels, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" Whether Tolstoy intended Ivan to be regarded as a "Christ figure," however, is not clear. Tolstoy's conception of Jesus is very unlike the commonplace, Everyman qualities that characterize Ivan Ilych. Without venturing a conclusive answer as to Tolstoy's purpose in drawing the connection, the similarity does seem to add a degree of intensity and significance to Ivan's existential moment.

The fact that Ivan hears an inner voice, "the voice of his soul," marks a significant advance in his spiritual development. For the first time the reader receives an indication that Ivan is more than a physiological being. In Chapter V, Ivan's understanding of his inner life was limited to his appendix, i.e., to his internal organs. By Chapter IX, however, that understanding has expanded to allow for an inner voice of conscience. Ivan's attention has been redirected from the physical plane to the spiritual plane. As this spiritual awakening moves forward, Ivan is finally able to question, if only for a moment, the values and beliefs that he has adopted.

As Ivan begins to examine his life, the similarity between Ivan Ilych and the Scrooge of Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* becomes strikingly apparent. For both Ivan and Scrooge, the recognition that that they have lived badly entails the memory of childhood, and for both protagonists the bright and joyful memories of childhood degenerate into unfulfilling and empty adult lives. Yet a closer look reveals that the similarities between *The Death of Ivan Ilych* and *A Christmas Carol* extend far beyond a similar process of recognition on the part of the two protagonists. In structure, genre, and theme, *A Christmas Carol*, written before *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, provides a sort of model for Tolstoy's own work. Much like *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, the narrative of *A Christmas Carol* begins in the present and flashes back to the past. It employs an almost identical narrative vantage point. And it deals with the life and life crisis of a representative member of a society gone wrong. But the similarity is

understandable. It is not a secret that Tolstoy admired Dickens more than any other writer. Tolstoy wrote of Dickens, "I consider him the greatest novelist of the nineteenth century." Along with having a picture of Dickens on his wall, and reading almost everything Dickens wrote, Tolstoy internalized and reshaped Dickens's work. It is not unreasonable to say that it was Tolstoy's reading of Dickens that provided the creative impulse that led to the production of "The Death of Ivan Ilych."

Chapter 10:

Twelve more days pass and Ivan is no longer able to leave his sofa. He lies facing the wall, pondering Death and questioning the rationale behind his suffering. Since the beginning of his illness, his moods have alternaten between the terror of imminent death and hope for the restoration of his organs' proper function. But as his disease progresses, hope appears less and less real while the terror before death grows increasingly insistent. Although surrounded by a populous town and numerous acquaintances, Ivan experiences a sense of loneliness more profound than if he were "either at the bottom of the sea or under the earth."

Ivan lives wholly in memories. Pictures of his past rise before him starting always with what is nearest in time and going back to his remote childhood. As he examines his life, Ivan realizes that the further back he looks, the more life there is. He finds that just as the pain grows worse and worse, so too does his life grow, like "a stone falling downward with increasing velocity." He comes to the conclusion that, "Life, a series of increasing sufferings, flies further and further towards its end—the most terrible suffering."

He desperately wishes to understand the purpose of his suffering, "what it is all for." He knows that an explanation would be possible if he had not lived rightly, but recalling once again the propriety of his life, he resigns himself to the senselessness of agony and death.

Analysis

Time, for Ivan, is contracting. The first four chapters of the novel span approximately forty years of Ivan's life, the second four chapters span several months, and the last four cover a time period of no more than four weeks. While Chapter VII mentions that Ivan's illness is in its third month, Chapter X begins with the words, "Another fortnight passed." The steadily

decreasing units of time mentioned throughout the text serve to highlight the fact that time is running out for Ivan.

Moreover, along with time, Ivan's spatial dimensions are also shrinking. From his initial migrations between provinces, Ivan comes to settle in a city and acquires an apartment. Before long he is confined to his study inside that apartment, and by Chapter X he can no longer move from his position on the sofa. Tolstoy uses this contraction of time and space both for artistic and practical purposes. The narrative tool not only brilliantly emphasizes Ivan's movement toward death; it also builds tension before the climax at the moment of Ivan's death. Yet Tolstoy also builds tension in another way. For the most part, each chapter in *The Death of Ivan Ilych* is smaller than the one before it. The size of each successive chapter decreases, and when matched with the contracting temporal and spatial dimensions, the decreasing size lends a gradually accelerating rhythm to the final chapters. Tolstoy draws our attention to this effect with his metaphor of a stone falling downward with increasing velocity.

Tolstoy mentions that Ivan's loneliness is more profound than "either at the bottom of the sea or under the earth." It is not a coincidence that both images supplied in this comparison suggest places of burial. Tolstoy seems to imply that for all practical purposes, Ivan is already dead and buried. Ivan's existence and struggles are shown, once again, to be of a spiritual nature, and he no longer links his recovery to physiological restoration. As Ivan realizes that his illness has pervaded his entire life and that the disease he suffers from is actually the manifestation of a general illness that has been growing with him since childhood, Ivan desires to move back, spiritually, to the moment of his birth. Yet, Ivan cannot find an explanation for that general illness, he cannot understand why he is suffering. His spiritual rebirth is stalled because, as in Chapter IX, Ivan is still unable to admit that he has not lived correctly.

Chapter 11

Two more weeks pass by, and Ivan's physiological condition degenerates further. One morning Praskovya enters Ivan's room to tell him that their daughter's suitor has formally proposed. Finding Ivan's condition even worse, however, she chooses to tell Ivan to take his medicine rather than make the announcement. Ivan looks at his wife with extreme animosity and tells her to let him die in peace. Ivan greets the doctor with the same hostility, declaring

that the doctor can do nothing for him. The doctor admits to Praskovya that Ivan's case is very serious, and that he can only administer drugs to ease the pain.

Yet more than his physical sufferings, Ivan's mental sufferings cause him the greatest torture. One night while looking at Gerasim's face, Ivan begins to doubt whether he has lived his life correctly. It occurs to him that his official life, the arrangement of his family, and all his social interests are actually false. He wants to defend his life path, but finds that there is nothing to defend. Realizing that the only truth in his life was when he attempted to struggle against the expectations and values of high society, Ivan realizes that his life "was not real at all, but a terrible and huge deception which had hidden both life and death." Seeing the footman, his wife, his daughter, and all the other people he comes across in his daily routine confirms to Ivan the truth of his realization. This consciousness increases his suffering "tenfold."

Praskovya insists that Ivan take communion, and Ivan consents. After the sacrament, Ivan feels some temporary relief and a desire to live. But Ivan's reprieve is short-lived, and his anger and pain are enflamed again by the thought of the falseness of Praskovya's life.

Analysis

For the first time, Ivan recognizes the hypocrisy and artificiality of his life. He calls into question the values that he has lived by, and he honestly entertains the conclusion that the way he lived has obscured both life and death. A proper view of life, Ivan now understands, entails an acknowledgment of the inevitability of death, as well as an appreciation of the true joys of life. The two go hand in hand. By accepting unpleasantness as a fact of life, one can derive full benefit from life's joys.

Ivan's realization has affected a shift in the focal point and intensity of his spiritual suffering. Ivan no longer feels obliged to take part in the pretense around him. He confronts both Praskovya and the doctor with the truth of his condition. Now, however, Ivan's spiritual pain is caused by the possibility that his whole life has been in error. Yet despite Ivan's new knowledge, Ivan still does not wholly relinquish the hope that his life was lived rightly. Even though he is now keenly aware of the spiritual component of life, he is not yet ready to fully admit the error of his life. In a sense, he knows it, but does not acknowledge it. In this manner, Tolstoy paves the way for the resolution of the life and death of Ivan Ilych.

Chapter 12:

After sending his wife away, Ivan begins screaming. The screaming is loud and terrible and it lasts for three days, during which time Ivan realizes that his doubts are still unsolved. Just like in the dream from Chapter IX, Ivan struggles in the black sack like a man in the executioner's hands, certain that he will not escape. His agony stems partly from his being thrust into the sack, and partly from not being able to get right into it. His inability to enter the sack is caused by his conviction that his life has been a good one, "That very justification of his life held him fast and prevented his moving forward, and it caused him most torment of all."

Suddenly, at the end of the third day, "some force" strikes Ivan in the chest and side. It pushes him through the sack and into the presence of a bright light. Ivan compares the sensation to the feeling of being in a railway car that you think is moving forward, but suddenly realize is moving backward. Just at this moment, Ivan's son, Vasya, approaches his bedside. As Ivan's hand falls on his son's head, Vasya begins to cry. When Ivan catches sight of the light, it is revealed to him that though his life has not been a good one, it can still be set right.

He asks himself, "What is the right thing?" He opens his eyes, sees his son kissing his hand, and feels sorry for him. His wife approaches his bed, her face wet with tears, and he feels sorry for her too. He realizes that life will be better for his family when he dies, and desires to say as much, but not having the strength to speak, he understands that he must act. He indicates to his wife to take Vasya away, and tries to say, "Forgive me," but he only manages to say, "Forego." As Ivan realizes that he must act so as to release his family from suffering and free himself from pain, what was oppressing him suddenly drops away "from two sides, from ten sides, and from all sides." He no longer fears death, and he knows this is so because "death is finished." In place of death, there is light, and Ivan is overwhelmed with joy. While for those present Ivan's agony lasts for two hours, for Ivan, the entire experience is a single changeless instant. In the middle of a sigh, Ivan stretches out and dies.

Analysis

The climactic moment of *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, the changeless instant when Ivan passes through the black sack into the light, fully resolves the contradictions and conflicts present

throughout the novel. As Ivan is reborn into the light, the spiritual finally transcends the physiological. Life conquers death, and the authentic prevails over the artificial. At the very moment of his rebirth, when Ivan asks himself, "What is the right thing?" Ivan's hand falls on Vasya's head and he feels sorry for him. Ivan's sincere and heartfelt expression of compassion, coupled with physical human contact, bridges the gap that Ivan had created between himself and others. Throughout Ivan's life, he had erected barriers between himself and the world. Whether by engrossing himself in his official work, losing himself in the game of bridge, or adopting a formal and escapist attitude toward life's unpleasantness, Ivan has isolated himself from meaningful human interaction. By adopting the values of high society, Ivan's life has lost all value. Yet when Ivan realizes the error of his past life, when he feels sorry for Vasya and Praskovya, when he opens himself up to an empathetic connection with another human being, the walls fall from around him. The self-erected barriers drop away from all sides, and Ivan experiences the true joy of unimpeded, authentic human relationships.

The climactic moment also completes the logic of reversal that has been operating throughout the story. Just as Ivan's life has caused his inner, spiritual death, so too, through his physical death Ivan achieves new spiritual life. The metaphor of the railway car captures the idea. At his moment of illumination, Ivan realizes that he has actually been traveling opposite his intended direction. Moving up in social esteem has not led to joy, fulfillment, and life, but to misery, emptiness, and death. Blinded by the values of high society, he has been traveling in the wrong direction on the road of life. When Ivan realizes his error and comes to a fuller understanding of the nature of life, he is reborn spiritually and experiences extreme joy. Tolstoy's message is clear: compassion for and empathetic connection with other human beings are the hallmarks of a proper life. The death of Ivan Ilych is not the result of his physical degeneration, but of his failure to understand the true nature and meaning of life. In actuality, however, Ivan's death does not represent a cessation of life, but rather its affirmation.

5 Characters:

Ivan Ilych Golovin - The protagonist of the novel. Ivan is a nondescript, unexceptional man. He admires those with high social standing, and conforms his values and behavior to their rules. Ivan has a penchant for formalizing every human relationship. In his official

work, he is careful to remove all personal concerns from consideration. In his private life, he adopts a fixed attitude toward his family.

Ivan's defining characteristic and principal shortcoming is that he lives his life by the dictates of others. Rather than relying on his own reason and good sense to direct his moral life, Ivan blindly adopts the beliefs and values of aristocratic society. Like a fly to a bright light, Ivan is drawn to those with high social standing. He believes that if he only imitates their conduct and lifestyle, if he only runs in the prescribed tracks of high society, his own life will progress according to plan and he will find meaning and fulfillment. Ivan becomes obsessed with standards of propriety and decorum, the etiquette of the upper class. He begins to act as one in his position should act. He takes a wife because a young legal gentleman with secure means should take a wife. He buys a house in the city and furnishes it with highbrow trappings because a cultured aristocrat should have a material status symbol.

As Ivan accustoms himself to propriety, he grows increasingly intolerant to everything that threatens his own comfort and material well-being. He fences himself off from every discomforting influence. When Praskovya introduces something unseemly and unpleasant with her pregnancy, Ivan retreats from his wife and absorbs himself in his official work. When married life becomes difficult, Ivan adopts a formal, contractual attitude toward his family. Ivan's professional ability to reduce complicated cases to mere forms on paper, to deal with potentially emotional and personal situations in terms of cold externals, is reflected in every sphere of his life. As Ivan scrambles to avoid the unpleasant, he reduces his personal relationships to shallow, self-preserving simulations. By adopting the values of aristocratic society, then, rather than using his reason to discover what is truly meaningful in life, Ivan isolates himself from the rest of the world. And in place of meaning and fulfillment, Ivan finds only pain and dissatisfaction.

Ivan, however, is more than just a misguided character. He is a representative figure in a broader moral scheme. The bourgeois sensibility that Ivan represents, the aristocratic type replete with its crass materialism and self- interest, is shown through Ivan's example to be inappropriate and utterly unfulfilling. Just as Ivan's demise makes him conscious of the error of his life, so too, it conveys the message to the reader that a life devoid of compassion and empathetic human connection will lead to a similar unfulfilling end.

Ivan's illness, then, can be seen as a curative influence. By forcing Ivan to confront the prospect of his death, it brings him face to face with his own isolation. That isolation terrifies Ivan, provoking serious existential reflection. And as Ivan begins to examine his life, as he questions his existence and the rationale behind his suffering, he slowly begins to see that his life was not as it should have been. Ivan's illness reveals to him the true nature of life. At the climactic moment of the novel, when Ivan passes into the presence of the light and realizes that compassion and love are the true life values by which to live, the incalculable joy that he experiences is proof of the quality of such a life.

Gerasim - Ivan's sick nurse and the butler's assistant. In this novel, Gerasim serves as a foil to Ivan: healthy, vigorous, direct, he is everything that Ivan is not. Unlike the other characters, Ivan understands that unpleasantness and unpredictability are a part of life.

Gerasim possesses the qualities that, more than any other, produce a joyful existence: a sense of compassion for and empathy with fellow human beings. Unlike the other characters in the novel, Gerasim interacts with people in an authentic and reflective way. Because the well-being of others is a matter of deep personal importance to him, Gerasim is able to connect with people in a way that breaks down isolation and creates meaningful bonds. It is not surprising that Gerasim is the only character capable of confronting death with equanimity and courage. He accepts death, and dirt, and illness as inevitable parts of life. Given the task of helping Ivan with his excretions and comforting him at night, Gerasim sees his duties as aid to a dying man. While Praskovya and Lisa, because of their self-interested natures, can only exacerbate Ivan's condition, Gerasim can both comfort and heal the dying man. When he supports Ivan's legs, Gerasim bridges the gap, both physically and spiritually, between Ivan and the world. It is not a coincidence that Ivan first realizes the error of his past life while staring at Gerasim's face. Gerasim is a truly spiritual character. He exemplifies the right way to live, and his contact with Ivan eases the man along the road to spiritual health.

The fact that Gerasim is a poor peasant is also revealing of Tolstoy's larger plan. In the novel, materialism and social ambition are barriers to a healthy existence. Knick-knacks and furnishings impede human contact, and aspirations to social prestige depersonalize human interaction. Gerasim, however, content with his social position and material possessions, is capable of developing the meaningful relationships so important to a fulfilling life. Gerasim is at peace with himself, and the mutually comforting relationships he has established not

only add immeasurable joy to life, they also give him the courage and strength to confront death.

Peter Ivanovich - Ivan's closest friend and fellow judge. Although he only appears in chapter I, Peter serves as a representative of Ivan's social milieu. He tends to view his relationships with people as instrumental to the achievement of his ends, and he goes to great lengths to avoid what is discomforting. Nevertheless, Peter is somehow more open to the truth than the other characters.

Peter Ivanovich, Ivan's closest friend and colleague, is only present in the first chapter of the novel. Yet because the narrator spends so much time describing his thoughts and actions, Peter and his view of Ivan's life and society play an important role in setting up the context and values of the story. Peter functions as a representative of Ivan's social milieu. His relationships with people are shallow and self-serving. Even though he has known Ivan for his entire life, Peter experiences no significant remorse on the occasion of Ivan's death. His thoughts, rather, center on possible career moves and transfers opened up by Ivan's vacant position. Peter, like the other members of the society he represents, sees human relationships as instrumental to the achievement of his ends. Compassionate and loving relationships do not exist, and Peter's attitude toward Ivan's death highlights this feature of society. In addition to his self-enclosed and self-interested qualities, Peter is characterized by a strong desire to avoid the unpleasant. He skirts around the topic of Ivan's death, grudgingly attends the funeral, and is generally unwilling to confront the prospect of his own mortality.

But if Peter is a representative of Ivan's social milieu, he turns out to be no typical representative. Peter exhibits a sensitivity and an openness not found in the other members of his society. He is the first of Ivan's friends to recognize that Ivan is dying. Several times in the first chapter Peter seems on the verge of comprehending the significance of Ivan's death, of stepping outside the socially accepted perspective and confronting mortality and the meaning of life. Peter is receptive to the warning conveyed by the expression on the face of Ivan's corpse. He sees the fulfillment and "fitness" of Ivan's expression, reflections of Ivan's discovery of the right way to live. While talking to Praskovya about Ivan's final days, Peter is strongly affected by the thought of Ivan's suffering. After the funeral, while leaving the house, Peter evokes the observation from Gerasim that it is God's will that everybody dies some day. Although Peter never makes the jump to a true understanding of the nature of life, his receptivity and consciousness differentiate him from the other members of society. Peter's

last name, Ivanovich, means the 'son of Ivan,' and seems to hint that like Ivan, Peter too will one day see the light.

Praskovya Fedorovna Golovina - Ivan's wife and the mother of his children. Praskovya's behavior toward others is artificial and self-interested. While feigning sympathy and concern for Ivan during his illness, her real attitude is one of hostility and impatience for his death.
Schwartz - Ivan's colleague and friend. Schwartz is a well-dressed, playful, thoroughly proper man. He ignores life's unpleasantness. At Ivan's funeral, he is immune to all depressing influences and maintains his jovial and lighthearted demeanor. Ivan mentions that Schwartz reminds him very much of his former self, and thus it is clear that Schwartz is a kind of double for Ivan. The fact that "Schwartz" is German for "black," hints at Tolstoy's belief in the emptiness and ultimate demise of such an attitude toward life.

Vladimir Ivanich - Ivan's son. Vasya is the youngest member of the Golovin household. Sensitive and quiet, Vasya has not yet been corrupted by the beliefs and values of his parents' social world. He is capable of forming empathetic bonds with other people, and he is the only other person, besides Gerasim, who truly understands Ivan and his condition.

Lisa - Ivan's daughter. Lisa is very much like her mother. Selfish and easily annoyed, Lisa resents any influence that distracts her from her own contentment. Her father's suffering inconveniences her more than anything else.

Fedor Petrovich - Lisa's fiancé. Fedor is a typical member of his society. There is nothing remarkable or noteworthy about his character.

6 Theme:

The Right Life

From the outset of the novel it is clear that Tolstoy believes there are two types of lives: the artificial life—represented by Ivan, Praskovya, Peter, and most everyone in Ivan's society and company—and the authentic life represented by Gerasim. The artificial life is marked by shallow relationships, self-interest, and materialism. It is insular, unfulfilling, and ultimately incapable of providing answers to the important questions in life. The artificial life is a

deception that hides life's true meaning and leaves one terrified and alone at the moment of death. The authentic life, on the other hand, is marked by pity and compassion. It sees others not as means to ends, but as individual beings with unique thoughts, feelings, and desires. The authentic life cultivates mutually affirming human relationships that break down isolation and allow for true interpersonal contact. Whereas the artificial life leaves one alone and empty, the authentic life fosters strength through solidarity and comfort through empathy. It creates bonds and prepares one to meet death.

Gerasim alone is unafraid of death. Confident in the correctness of his life and unafraid of personal involvement, Gerasim has a self-sacrificing love for others that infuses his life with meaning. The spiritual support that Gerasim provides to Ivan by empathizing with his plight and relieving his isolation is even more important than the physical support Gerasim provides by holding Ivan's legs. Gerasim is able to lessen Ivan's pain by sharing in it. The virtue of the authentic life is that at the same time Gerasim is helping Ivan, he is also benefiting from the relationship. Compassion and love go both ways, and the authentic life is the right life.

The Inevitability of Death

The story of Ivan's steady approach toward death is also the story of Ivan's recognition of death and his search for a compromise with its dreadful and nullifying power. How is one to make sense of the end of one's life, of one's relationships, projects, and dreams, of one's very existence? Throughout the novel, Tolstoy makes clear that preparation for death begins with a proper attitude toward life. As Ivan's attitude toward life changes, prompted by pain and the prospect of death, his emotions progress from sheer terror to utter joy. The avoidance of death that characterizes Ivan's social milieu is based on a delusion designed to protect people from unpleasant realities. It leads only to emptiness, horror, and dissatisfaction. An acceptance of death, however, and recognition of the true unpredictable nature of life allows for confidence, peace, and even joy at the moment of death. More than anything else, then, the novel can be seen as a lesson on making sense of death through living rightly.

Inner life vs. Outer life

Much like the artificial/authentic dichotomy, Tolstoy depicts human existence as a conflict between the inner and the outer, the spiritual life and the physical life. Up until Chapter IX, Ivan is a purely physical being. He shows no indication of any spiritual life whatsoever. He

lives for the benefit of his own flesh and relates with others only insofar as they promote his desires. Worst of all, Ivan mistakes his physical life for his true spiritual life. He believes that his existence is the "right" existence, and he refuses to see the error of his life. As a result of denying the spiritual, Ivan is incapable of transcending the physical. He experiences excruciating pain, overwhelming unhappiness, and absolute terror. Yet when the prospect of his death forces Ivan to confront his isolation, he gradually begins to see the importance of the spiritual life. As he grows toward understanding, as he supplants the physical with the spiritual, he moves beyond suffering, conquers death, and experiences extreme joy. Tolstoy's message is clear: the task of each individual is to recognize the duality of the self and to live so as the less important physical life conforms to the more important spiritual life.

Motifs

Reversal

Tolstoy incorporates several patterns of reversal into the structure of the novel. The actual death of Ivan Ilych, the chronological end of the story, occurs in the first chapter. The remainder of the novel is devoted not to Ivan's death as the title seems to indicate, but to his life. Tolstoy reverses the very concepts of life and death. During his early life, when Ivan seems to be growing in strength, freedom, and status, he is actually being reduced to weakness, bondage, and isolation. After Chapter VII, when Ivan is confined to his study and suffers physical degeneration and alienation, he is actually being reborn spiritually. Tolstoy reinforces this point by means of several verbal formulations. Ivan describes his spiritual awakening as if he were moving downwards while all the time believing he was moving up. He compares his sudden insight into the true nature of his life to the sensation one gets in a railway car upon discovering that the true direction of travel is opposite the supposed direction.

Alienation

Characteristic of the artificial life as well as of the purely physical life is the tendency toward alienation. Whenever Ivan encounters a situation or relationship that does not promote his pleasant existence, he distances himself from it. This reaction ties in to the larger theme of the inner life v. outer life. Because Ivan has no spiritual existence, he is incapable of seeing other people as individuals. He acts only to obtain the good for himself and has no value for those

that impinge upon his pleasure. Thus, in his selfish quest for happiness, Ivan shuts out individuals. Yet by fencing others out, he fences himself in. Tolstoy makes use of several images of enclosure and isolation to reinforce this point. From the funeral notice surrounded by a black border to the coffin lid leaning against the wall, Tolstoy hints and the voluntary separation that Ivan created.

The Pleasant, the Proper, and the Decorous

Throughout the novel, Tolstoy uses the words pleasant/proper/decorous to refer to the accepted norms of social life. These norms are an important factor in the theme of the right life, as discussed above. Ivan's inordinate concern with propriety, decorum, and standards of conduct is an excellent indication that he is living the artificial, rather than the authentic life. He is more concerned with external appearance than with internal substance, with the appearance of truth rather than with actual truth. The man who chooses not to concern himself with the opinions of high society, who disregards the pleasant/proper/decorous for the real, the true, and the genuine is the man who lives the right way.

Contraction of Time and Space

An interesting if not readily apparent motif is the contraction of time and space in the novel. This contraction is an important factor in the theme of the inner life v. the outer life because it highlights the significance of the spiritual and reinforces the notion that life is not limited to the time between birth and death. Tolstoy accomplishes this effect in several ways. The first four chapters of the novel cover more than forty years, the second four chapters span several months, and the final four chapters span only slightly more than four weeks. In addition to the shrinking temporal framework, Tolstoy also makes use of shrinking spatial dimensions. In his early life Ivan moves from town to town. Middle-aged Ivan settles in a city and obtains an apartment. Shortly after the onset of his illness he is confined to his study, and by the end of the novel he cannot move from the sofa. In addition, each chapter in the novel, for the most part, is progressively shorter than the one before it. Thus, time and space contract until both reach point zero at the moment of Ivan's death, when Ivan experiences the single, eternal, changeless instant. This instant, when Ivan's spirit transcends the physical boundaries of time and space, signifies the end of death and reinforces the importance of a spiritual life.

Bourgeois Society

Throughout the novel, Tolstoy depicts aristocratic society as a collection of self-interested, materialistic, shallow individuals. The members of aristocratic society care little for authentic human relationships. They desire status and pleasure and attempt to obtain their goals at the expense of their so-called friends. This depiction plays an important role in the theme of the right life. Every member of Ivan's society leads an artificial existence. Tolstoy hints that materialism and social climbing connote obstacles to living rightly.

Foreign Language References

Several foreign-language references occur throughout the text of the novel. Each reference, by conveying a hidden truth about Ivan, helps inform a major theme of the work. Calling Ivan *le phenix de la famille* means figuratively that he is the member of the family most likely to succeed. Understood literally, however, it foreshadows Ivan's spiritual rebirth, his rising up from the ashes after the fiery death caused by his artificial life. Bringing to mind the mythical phoenix that was reborn from the ashes of its own destruction, this foreign language reference hints at Ivan's eventual recognition of the importance of the spiritual and highlights the theme of the inner life vs. the outer life. Similarly, the motto inscribed on his medallion *respice finem* "look to the end" is both a helpful suggestion for a future lawyer to focus on the outcome, and a warning for a man living an artificial life to prepare himself for death.

SYMBOLS:

In Chapter IX, Ivan first dreams of the deep black sack and he imagines himself being thrust further and further into it. He wants to fall into the bag, yet he fears it at the same time. He resists being pushed into it, yet he also cooperates. If the bag is understood as a symbol of death, Ivan's ambivalence becomes clear. He both longs for the reprieve of death and fears having to relinquish life. The fact that Ivan breaks through the bag anticipates Ivan's escape from the power of death. It seems reasonable, however, that the symbol of the bag, much like the story itself, operates on two levels. As well as its function as a symbol of death, the bag also symbolizes a womb, the source of life. The pain and suffering that Ivan experiences while passing through the bag into the light refer to the trauma of birth into new life. The duality of the symbol holds a key to the story. In Ivan's life, what appears like physical death is actually spiritual rebirth, while his old life was the cause of spiritual death. Things are not what they seem, and the action must be understood in light of the motif of reversal. Ivan's life was his death, and his death brings new life.

7 Explanations of Important Quotations:

Ivan Ilych's life had been most simple and most ordinary and therefore most terrible.

This line comes from Chapter II of the novel, and is among the most famous in Russian literature. While a simple life is generally considered a virtue, Ivan's life is simple in the wrong way. He is a conformist. His values, desires, and behavior are wholly determined by the opinions and expectations of his social superiors. He chooses his friends based upon their social standing. He decides to marry because it is considered the right thing to do. Ivan's life is terrible because it is a life devoid of true freedom, of true individuality. Ivan does not use his own reason to direct his moral life. Rather, he imbibes his beliefs from aristocrats. In a sense, Ivan is a robot.

In his work itself, especially in his examinations, he very soon acquired a method of eliminating all considerations irrelevant to the legal aspect of the case, and reducing even the most complicated case to a form in which it would be presented on paper only in its externals, completely excluding his personal opinion of the matter, while above all observing every prescribed formality.

Ivan's professional ability to reduce complicated cases to mere forms on paper, to deal with potentially emotional and personal situations in terms of cold externals, reflects in all aspects of his life. Ivan deals with unpleasant situations and relationships by pushing them away and erecting barriers between himself and the disagreeable influence. When married life grows difficult for Ivan he spends more and more time at work, and when he is obliged to be at home he maintains a safe distance from his wife and family by inviting guests to join him. Ivan expects predictability from the world, and he retreats from it when the unexpected arises. Like his professional life, Ivan's personal life is formal and disconnected. By shutting out his wife, family, and the rest of the world, Ivan manages to shut himself in. He is isolated and alienated, and in the end his life is a mere form.

It is as if I had been going downhill while I imagined I was going up. And that is really what it was. I was going up in public opinion, but to the same extent life was ebbing away from me. And now it is all done and there is only death.

These lines are from chapter IX of the novel, shortly after Ivan hears the voice of his soul. For the first time Ivan begins to realize that social status is not the same as fulfillment. He feels that his desire to travel in the prescribed tracks of aristocratic society actually robbed him of life. Whether Ivan truly understands the implications of his 'realization' is open to question. Later in the novel, Ivan chooses to maintain his belief in the correctness of his life, rather than carry his realization to its logical conclusion. Regardless of the true extent of Ivan's understanding, however, the quotation reflects his spiritual awakening.

'Maybe I did not live as I ought to have done,' it suddenly occurred to him. 'But how could that be, when I did everything properly?' he replied, and immediately dismissed from his mind this, the sole solution of all the riddles of life and death, as something quite impossible.

This crucial passage appears in Chapter IX and reveals as much about Ivan's moral quandary as it does about Tolstoy's values. The fact that Ivan questions the correctness of his past life reflects Ivan's growing awareness of the true meaning of life, yet his inability to dissociate "proper" behavior from "right" behavior prevents him from seeing the error of his ways. Ivan still thinks that he will find happiness by imitating the behavior of his social superiors. He is not yet aware of Tolstoy's reigning values: compassion and love, and their importance in living a happy and correct life. Tolstoy's belief that living rightly will provide answers to all the riddles of the world, furthermore, only reinforces the importance of his values.

Suddenly some force struck him in the chest and side, making it still harder to breathe, and he fell through the hole and there at the bottom was a light…Just then his schoolboy son had crept softly in and gone up to the bedside. The dying man was still screaming desperately and waving his arms. His hand fell on the boy's head, and the boy caught it, pressed it to his lips, and began to cry.

These climactic lines come from the final chapter of the novel. In the midst of his agony Ivan is spiritually reborn. As he passes into the light, Ivan finally realizes that his life was not what it should have been. It is not an accident that Ivan's epiphany coincides exactly with his hand falling on his son's head. For the first time in the novel, Ivan expresses deep pity for his son and wife. This spiritual intimacy, coupled with the physical closeness represented by touch, breaks down the screens Ivan has erected between himself and others. As Ivan bridges the gap, his isolation disappears, the meaning of life is revealed, and true joy fills him.

8 Questions for Practice:

Why does Tolstoy choose to place Ivan's funeral in the first chapter?

By placing Ivan's funeral in the first chapter, Tolstoy provides an intimate view of the social milieu Ivan occupied, thereby rendering it susceptible to evaluation and critique. He also establishes contrasting attitudes toward the unpleasant aspects of life, a principal theme in the work. The shallow relationships and the artificial, self-interested behavior of Ivan's wife, colleagues, and friends demonstrate the hypocrisy of his society, and serve to undercut the values by which Ivan lived his life. The fact that Ivan's colleagues are more affected by the professional position opened by his vacancy than by the death of their friend and co-worker is as much an indication of their self-interest as it is of the misguided principles by which Ivan lived. Similarly, Praskovya's indifference toward her husband's death highlights both Ivan's inability to develop a loving relationship with his wife and her own shallowness and falsity. In this way, Chapter I, in part, serves as an attack on the empty and valueless life of the society of which Ivan was a part. The falseness of relations, the insincerity of interaction, and the primacy of self-interest are satirized by Tolstoy, and revealed as inadequate and ultimately unfulfilling.

Yet Chapter I also functions to establish contrasting attitudes toward death. Neither Peter, nor Schwartz, nor Praskovya, nor Ivan's colleagues at work are willing to confront the prospect of their own mortality. They avoid it, ignore it, and gene rally discount its effect on their existence. Thus, the habit of disregarding the unpleasantness of life is a habit of Ivan's society. The peasant servant Gerasim, on the other hand, is the only character that openly acknowledges his own mortality. He confronts death and unpleasantness as inevitable aspects of life. By pitting Gerasim's worldview against the worldview of the members of aristocratic society, therefore, Tolstoy lays the groundwork for an exploration of one of the work's major themes.

Some critics believe that The Death of Ivan Ilych is a work of moral fiction, that it is designed primarily to provide moral instruction to its audience. Discuss this claim and provide evidence from the text to support your opinion.

There is no doubt that a definite moral agenda drives Tolstoy's narrative. *The Death of Ivan Ilych* is designed to make us question the way we have been living, and ultimately, to conform our behavior to the model of right living presented in the n ovel. Although imparted in the context of a story rather than in a logical argument, Tolstoy's beliefs come across no less clearly. By describing the thoughts, desires, and goals of an average man of moderate means, Tolstoy creates a composite sketch of u s all. In allowing us to identify with the life of the protagonist, Tolstoy also links us emotionally to his suffering and agonizing death. If Ivan's values and goals, not so dissimilar from our own, lead him to a bitter existential crisis at the moment o f death, what will our beliefs do for us? We begin to wonder whether the crass materialism and hypocritical relationships of Ivan's society, so mercilessly satirized by Tolstoy, extend even to our own lives. Ivan's misery and unhappiness suddenly appe ar not so far away. Yet through Gerasim's model and Ivan's death-knell epiphany, Tolstoy points us in the direction of the light. The right life, the authentic life, is one of compassion and self-sacrificing love. It sees others not as means to ends, but as individual beings with unique thoughts, feelings, and desires. The authentic life cultivates mutually affirming human relationships that break down isolation and allow for true interpersonal contact. It fosters strength through solidarity and comfo rt through empathy. It creates bonds and prepares us to meet death. Gerasim is the only character that lives wholly and unambiguously the right way, and it is not a coincidence that he is also the only character unafraid of death and personal involvement. Just as Gerasim teaches Ivan the true meaning of life, so too, Gerasim acts as a moral guide for us. By describing Ivan's incorrect life, consequent suffering, and ultimate rebirth into a moral existence, Tolstoy succeeds in providing us with a roadmap t o morality.

Identify and discuss the narrative and structural devices that Tolstoy uses.

Tolstoy locates his narrative within a shrinking spatial and temporal framework. Space and time both progressively contract throughout the novel until they reach point zero at the moment of Ivan's death. The first four chapters of the novel span more than forty years. Tolstoy relates his account of the life of Ivan from childhood, through the development of his professional career and his marriage, to the onset of his illness. During this time, Ivan moves freely from province to province. His spatial boundaries are virtually unlimited. In the second four chapters, the novel's action spans several months. Ivan's illness develops, and as he struggles to cope with his physiological degeneration he is limited spatially to the confines of his study. The fi nal four chapters of the novel cover less than five weeks. Dedicated to Ivan's

decline and agonizing death, they span the shortest amount of time and most severely limit Ivan's spatial dimensions, restricting him to the sofa in his study. This steady shri nking of time and space accentuates the feeling of paralysis, anxiety, and helplessness that Ivan experiences. It reinforces the sensation of imminent death in a subtle and effective way. Yet this device does more than emphasize death, it also allows Tols toy to express a principal theme of the work. As space and time begin to close in on Ivan from all sides, as Ivan's physical existence disappears, Ivan is reborn into a spiritual life. He experiences a single changeless moment, and when Ivan sees the ligh t, he explodes the boundaries of time and space by passing into spirit. Thus, not only does the shrinking spatial/temporal framework enhance our feeling of the protagonist's experience, it also helps Tolstoy explore the theme of the spiritual vs. the phys ical world.

Another of Tolstoy's subtle structural devices deals with the amount of words he uses to describe events. Give or a take a few words, every chapter in the novel is progressively shorter than the chapter before it. While chapter I is approximately 300 line s, chapter VII is 153, and chapter XII is only 73. The decreasing size of the chapters compliments the decreasing time frame and spatial dimensions. It gives the story momentum, and propels the reader toward the inevitable conclusion of Ivan's life.

Why does Tolstoy present the story through the eyes of an omniscient narrator?

Discuss the significance of the title. If the work professes to be about Ivan's death, why is it almost entirely dedicated to Ivan's life?

Is the fact that Gerasim is a peasant important to understanding his character and worldview?

Discuss the use of the black bag as a symbol in *The Death of Ivan Ilych.*

Why is Ivan's method of dealing with life's unpleasantness ultimately unsuccessful?

According to Tolstoy, why is it important to acknowledge one's own mortality?

The Overcoat

1 Introduction

2 About The Author

3 Summary of the Text

4 Characters of the novel

5 Analysis of the Novel

6 Theme of the Novel

7 Important Questions and Answers

1Introduction:

Gogol is probably one of the most famous and influential Russian authors of all time and "The Overcoat" is his claim to fame. But why is everyone making such a ruckus about the short story whose main character is named after poop? Good question; let's get to the bottom of it. But "The Overcoat" took on a life of its own. Belinsky—one of the most influential Russian literary critics of the time—praised it for innovating a new kind of naturalist literature, which was different from the romantic and rhetorical literature that dominated Russia at the time .A wave of authors took up Gogol's style, heralding the beginning of a new literary movement, one that would eventually even be endorsed by the Soviet government, and they weren't always the easiest to impress. This little story became so influential that none other than the great Fyodor Dostoevsky said: "We all come out of Gogol's overcoat."

Nikolai Gogol grew up in hard times for Russia. When he was 17 years old in 1825, a group of revolutionaries called the Decembrists tried to overthrow the czarist regime. Of course they were crushed, but the whole affair shook up the Russian populace. It also made the next czar, Nicholas I, very strict. As a result he changed up the whole Russian bureaucracy. To put that into context, rank one was the highest position you could get. The prominent personage was probably rank six, seven, or eight. And Akaky? He's just a lowly titular councilor. His rank didn't even have a number.

Following the Decembrist's failed coup, Czar Nicholas I gave the Russian bureaucracy a pretty big makeover. He took the aristocracy out of the bureaucracy, causing all sorts of shifts in the ranks, so by the time that Gogol applied for a job as a bureaucrat in 1828, the whole bureaucracy was in a state of unrest. With all this awkward reorganization, the Russian government didn't sound like a very fun place to work during this time, and we can see why Gogol paints such a poor picture of Russian government officials in "The Overcoat."

Ah, St. Petersburg, the city established by Czar Peter the Great in an attempt to make 18th-century Russia more like Amsterdam. As the imperial capital of Russia, the city was teeming with officials just like Akaky, but that's not what Gogol tells us is important to the story. Instead, it's the weather. The narrator says:

The average temperature of St. Petersburg in the winter is 12°F. In 1883 it even hit a record low of -25.6°F. No wonder Akaky got so sick when he went home without his coat. At those temperatures he could literally freeze to death in the streets. In some other countries it might be silly to write a whole story about a coat, but it's obvious that in St. Petersburg owning a good overcoat is a big deal.

You'd think a story set in the capital of Russia would be full of the glitz and glamor of city life, but Gogol is no F. Scott Fitzgerald. Remember, Akaky is a poor low-ranking official, and even though he lives in the city, he can't take advantage of all the culture and shopping it has to offer him. Gogol made this clear to readers by contrasting the neighborhood Akaky lives in with the neighborhood of the official who throws the party. The narrator says:

Akaky Akakievich was first obliged to traverse a sort of wilderness of deserted, dimly lighted streets; but in proportion as he approached the official's quarter of the city, the streets became more lively, more populous, and more brilliantly illuminated. (71)

It's almost like he's entering a different world, but it's just the nice part of town. We can tell Akaky probably didn't get out of the house much. Akaky's story points out that even in a regal city like St. Petersburg, there are poor people who have very little. It's likely that if Akaky didn't live in such an impoverished part of town, he never would have had his coat stolen in the first place. The juxtaposition is even more biting because just down the street, people are spending money and having a good time without a single thought for the little people like him.

2 About The author:

Gogol is perhaps the great Russian novelist, dramatist, satirist, founder of the so-called critical realism in Russian literature, best-known for his novel *Mertvye dushi* I-II (1842, Dead Souls). Gogol's prose is characterized by imaginative power and linguistic playfulness. As an exposer of grotesque in human nature, Gogol could be called the Hieronymus Bosch of Russian literature.

"The moon is made by some lame cooper, and you can see the idiot has no idea about moons at all. He put in a creosoted rope and some wood oil; and this has led to such a terrible stink all over the earth that you have to hold your nose. Another reason the moon is such a tender globe it that people just cannot live on it any more, and all that's left alive there are noses. This is also why we cannot see our own noses – they're all on the moon." (from *Diary of a Madman*, 1835)

Nikolai Gogol was born in Sorochintsi, Ukraine, where he grew up on his parents' country estate. His real surname was Ianovskii, but the writer's grandfather had taken the name 'Gogol' to claim a noble Cossack ancestry. Gogol's father was an educated and gifted man, who wrote plays, poems, and sketches in Ukrainian.

Gogol started write while in high school. He attended Poltava boarding school (1819-21) and then Nezhin high school (1821-28), where he produced plays for the student's theatre and acted in some productions. However, he was not very highly esteemed by his school and he found it difficult to open up to his schoolmates, who regarded him as the "mysterious dwarf," a secretive individual. To his mother he wrote: "At home I am considered willful; here I am called meek . . . in some quarters I am so very quiet, modest, polite; in others – sullen, pensive, uncouth . . . for some I am intelligent, for others I am stupid" (March 1, 1828).

Considered by his contemporaries one of the preeminent figures of the natural school of Russian literary realism, later critics have found in Gogol's work a fundamentally romantic sensibility, with strains of Surrealism and the grotesque ("The Nose", "Viy", "The Overcoat," "Nevsky Prospekt"). His early works, such as Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka, were influenced by his Ukrainian upbringing, Ukrainian culture and folklore His later writing satirised political corruption in the Russian Empire (The Government Inspector, Dead Souls), leading to his eventual exile. The novel Taras Bulba (1835) and the play Marriage (1842),

along with the short stories "Diary of a Madman", "The Tale of How Ivan Ivanovich Quarreled with Ivan Nikiforovich", "The Portrait" and "The Carriage", round out the tally of his best-known works.

In 1828 Gogol, an aspiring writer, settled in St. Petersburg, with a certificate attesting his right to "the rank of the 14th class". To support himself, Gogol worked at minor governmental jobs and wrote occasionally for periodicals. Although he was interested in literature, he also dreamed of becoming an actor. However, the capital of Russia did not welcome him with open arms and his early narrative poem, *Hans Küchelgarten* (1829), turned out to be a disaster.

Between the years 1831 and 1834 Gogol taught history at the Patriotic Institute and worked as a private tutor. In 1831 he met Aleksandr Pushkin who greatly influenced his choice of literary material, especially his "Dikinka tales", which were based on Ukrainian folklore. Their friendship lasted until the great poet's death. *Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka* from 1831-32, Gogol's breakthrough work, showed his skill in mixing fantastic with macabre, and at the same saying something very essential about the Russian character.

After failure as an assistant lecturer of world history at the University of St. Petersburg (1834-35), Gogol became a full-time writer. Under the title *Mirgorod* (1835) Gogol published a new collection of stories, beginning with 'Old-World Landowners', which described the decay of the old way of life. The book also included the famous historical tale 'Taras Bulba', written under the influence of Walter Scott. The protagonist is a strong, heroic character, not very typical for the author's later cavalcade of bureaucrats, lunatics, swindlers, and humiliated losers. One hostile critic descibed his city dwellers as the "scum of Petersburg". Inspired by Gogol's themes of rebellion and freedom, the Czech composer Leoš Janáček used the novel as the frame-work for his orchestral rhapsody *Taras Bulba* (1918).

In his short stories, Gogol fully utilized the Petersburg mythology, in which the city was treated "both as 'paradise', a utopian ideal city of the future, the embodiment of Reason, and as the terrible masquerade of Antichrist." (Yuri Lotman in *Universe of the Mind*, 1990) Gogol was also the first to publish an extended literary comparison between Moscow and Petersburg, concluding, "Russia needs Moscow; Petersburg needs Russia."

"I am destined by the mysterious powers to walk hand in hand with my strange heroes," wrote Gogol once, "viewing life in all its immensity as it rushes past me, viewing it through laughter seen by the world and tears unseen and unknown by it." *St. Petersburg Stories* (1835) examined social relationships and disorders of mind; Gogol's influence can be seen among others in Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* (1864) and *The Crime and the Punishment* (1866). Gogolian tradition continued also among others in the stories of Franz Kafka.

'The Nose' from this period was about a man who loses his nose, which tries to live its own life. Gogol himself had a long nose, but the motifs in the story were borrowed from other writers. According to V. Vinograd's study (1987), these kind of surrealistic images were popular the 1820-1830s. It is still a puzzle: no key has been found to explain, why Collegiate Assessor Kovalev's nose transforms into civil servant and back into nose. The central plot circles around Kovalev's quest to recapture his runaway organ – he has arrived in Moscow to climb up the social ladder but without proper face it is impossible. Without an arm or leg it is not unbearable, thinks Major, but without a nose a man is, the devil knows what... In the outwardly crazy story lurks a serious idea: what matters is not the person but one's rank.

In 'Nevsky Prospect' a talented artist falls in love with a tender poetic beauty. She turns out to be a prostitute and the artist commits suicide when his romantic illusions are shattered. 'The Diary of a Madman' asked why is it that "all the best things in life, they all go to the Equerries or the generals?" 'Shinel' (1842, The Overcoat), one of Gogol's most famous short stories, contrasted humility and meekness with the rudeness of the "important personage". The central character is Akakii Akakievich, a lowly government clerk. When winter begins he notices that his old over coat is beyond repairing. He manages to save money for a new, luxurious over coat. His colleagues at the office arrange a party for his acquisition. But his happiness proves to be short-lived. On the way home he is attacked by thieves and robbed of his coat. To recover his loss, Akakievich asks help from an Important Person, a director of a department with the rank of general. He treats harshly Akakievich, who develops a fever, and dies of fright within three days. One night when the Important Person is returning home, he is attacked by a ghost, the late Akakii, who now steals his overcoat. The stealing of outer garments continue, even though now the ghost is a big man with a moustache and enormous fists.

Gogol published in 1836 several stories in Pushkin's journal *Sovremennik*, and in the same year appeared his famous play, *The Inspector General*. It told a simple tale of a young civil servant, Khlestakov, who finds himself stranded in a small provincial town. By mistake, he is taken by the local officials to be a government inspector, who is visiting their province incognito. Khlestakov happily adapts to his new role and exploits the situation. His true identity is revealed but then arrives the real inspector. Gogol masterfully creates with a few words people, places, things, and lets them disappear in the flow of the story. Vladimir Nabokov wrote: "Who is that unfortunate bather, steadily and uncannily growing, adding weight, fattening himself on the marrow of a metaphor? We never shall know – but he almost managed to gain a footing."

Its first stage production was in St Petersburg, given in the presence of the tsar. As he left his box after the première, The tsar dropped the comment: "Hmm, what a play! Gets at everyone, and most of all at me!" Gogol, who was always sensitive about reaction to his work, fled Russia for Western Europe. He visited Germany, Switzerland, and France, and settled then in Rome. He also made a pilgrimage to Palestine in 1848, to pray for inspiration for the part II of *Dead Souls*. He had burned the manuscript of part II for the first time in 1845. In Rome Gogol wrote his major work, *The Dead Souls*. "The prophet finds no honor in his homeland," he said. Gogol claimed that the story was suggested by Pushkin in a conversation in 1835. Pushkin did not live to see its publication, but on hearing the first chapters read, he exclaimed: "God, how sad our Russia is!"

Wishing to embrace the whole Russian society, Gogol regarded the first volume merely as "a pale introduction to the great epic poem which is taking shape in my mind and will finally solve the riddle of my existence". The story depicted the adventures Pavel Ivanovich Chichikov, who arrives in a provincial town to buy '"dead souls," dead serfs. As a character, he is the opposite of starving Akakii Akakievich. By selling these 'souls,' Chichikov planned to make a huge profit. He meets local landowners and departs the town in a hurry, when rumors start spread about him. In the play *Zhenitba* (1842) nearly everybody lies and the protagonist, Podgolesin, cannot make up his mind about marriage. He hesitates, agrees, then withdraws his promise, the life is full of cheating, but when people jeer at each other, they actually tell the truth. Igrogi (The Gamblers), about professional card-sharps, was first staged in 1843; Dmitri Shostakovich based his unfinished opera on the comedy.

Except for a short visits to Russia in 1839-40 and 1841-42, Gogol was abroad for twelve years. The first edition of Gogol's collected works came out in 1842 and made him one of the most popular Russian writers. Two years before his return, Gogol had published *Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends* (1847), in which he upheld the autocratic tsarist regime and the patriarchal Russian way of life. The book disappointed radicals who had seen Gogol's works as examples of social criticism. "The peasant must not even *know* there exist other books besides the Bible," Gogol argued. The radical critic Vissarion Belinsky labelled him as the "apostle of ignorance" and Sergei Askakov lamented that "the best that can be done is to call him a madman."

His Early life

Gogol was born in the Ukrainian Cossack village of Sorochyntsi in Poltava Governorate of the Russian Empire, present-day Ukraine. His mother was a descendant of Polish landowners. His father Vasily Gogol-Yanovsky, a descendant of Ukrainian Cossacks and who died when Gogol was 15 years old, belonged to the 'petty gentry', wrote poetry in Ukrainian and Russian, and was an amateur Ukrainian-language playwright. As was typical of the left-bank Ukrainian gentry of the early nineteenth century, the family spoke Ukrainian as well as Russian. As a child, Gogol helped stage Ukrainian-language plays in his uncle's home theater

In 1820, Gogol went to a school of higher art in Nizhyn and remained there until 1828. It was there that he began writing. He was not popular among his schoolmates, who called him their "mysterious dwarf", but with two or three of them he formed lasting friendships. Very early he developed a dark and secretive disposition, marked by a painful self-consciousness and boundless ambition. Equally early he developed a talent for mimicry, which later made him a matchless reader of his own works and induced him to toy with the idea of becoming an actor.

In 1828, on leaving school, Gogol came to Saint Petersburg, full of vague but glowingly ambitious hopes. He had hoped for literary fame, and brought with him a Romantic poem of German idyllic life – *Hans Küchelgarten*. He had it published, at his own expense, under the name of "V. Alov." The magazines he sent it to almost universally derided it. He bought all the copies and destroyed them, swearing never to write poetry again.

Gogol was one of the first masters of the short story, alongside Alexander Pushkin, Prosper Mérimée, E. T. A. Hoffmann, Edgar Allan Poe, and Nathaniel Hawthorne. He was in touch with the "literary aristocracy", had a story published in Anton Delvig's Northern Flowers, was taken up by Vasily Zhukovsky and Pyotr Pletnyov, and (in 1831) was introduced to Pushkin.

Literary development

In 1831 he brought out the first volume of his Ukrainian stories (Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka), which met with immediate success. He followed it in 1832 with a second volume, and in 1835 by two volumes of stories entitled Mirgorod, as well as by two volumes of miscellaneous prose entitled Arabesques. At this time Russian editors and critics such as Nikolai Polevoy and Nikolai Nadezhdin saw in Gogol the emergence of a Ukrainian, rather than Russian, writer, using his works to illustrate supposed differences between Russian and Ukrainian national characters, a fact that has been overlooked in later Russian literary history The themes and style of these early prose works by Gogol, as well as his later drama, were similar to the work of Ukrainian writers and dramatists who were his contemporaries and friends, including Hryhory Kvitka-Osnovyanenko and Vasily Narezhny. However, Gogol's satire was much more sophisticated and unconventional. At this time, Gogol developed a passion for Ukrainian history and tried to obtain an appointment to the history department at Kiev University. Despite the support of Pushkin and Sergey Uvarov, the Russian minister of education, his appointment was blocked by a Kyivan bureaucrat on the grounds that he was unqualified His fictional story Taras Bulba, based on the history of Ukrainian cossacks, was the result of this phase in his interests. During this time he also developed a close and lifelong friendship with another Ukrainian, the historian and naturalist Mykhaylo Maksymovych

In 1834 Gogol was made Professor of Medieval History at the University of St. Petersburg, a job for which he had no qualifications. He turned in a performance ludicrous enough to warrant satiric treatment in one of his own stories. After an introductory lecture made up of brilliant generalizations which the 'historian' had prudently prepared and memorized, he gave up all pretense at erudition and teaching, missed two lectures out of three, and when he did appear, muttered unintelligibly through his teeth. At the final examination, he sat in utter silence with a black handkerchief wrapped around his head, simulating a toothache, while another professor interrogated the students." This academic venture proved a failure and he resigned his chair in 1835.

Between 1832 and 1836 Gogol worked with great energy, and though almost all his work has in one way or another its sources in these four years of contact with Pushkin, he had not yet decided that his ambitions were to be fulfilled by success in literature. During this time, the Russian critics Stepan Shevyrev and Vissarion Belinsky, contradicting earlier critics, reclassified Gogol from a Ukrainian to a Russian writer. It was only after the presentation, on 19 April 1836, of his comedy The Government Inspector (Revizor) that he finally came to believe in his literary vocation. The comedy, a violent satire of Russian provincial bureaucracy, was staged thanks only to the intervention of the emperor, Nicholas I.

From 1836 to 1848 Gogol lived abroad, travelling through Germany and Switzerland. Gogol spent the winter of 1836–1837 in Paris, among Russian expatriates and Polish exiles, requently meeting the Polish poets Adam Mickiewicz and Bohdan Zaleski. He eventually settled in Rome. For much of the twelve years from 1836 Gogol was in Italy. He studied art, read Italian literature and developed a passion for opera. He mingled with Russian and other visitors, and in 1838 met Count Joseph Vielhorskiy, the 23-year-old son of the official who had brought Gogol's *Government Inspector* to the attention of the emperor. Vielhorsky was travelling in hopes of curing his tuberculosis. Gogol and Vielhorsky fell in love, a relationship which was soon severed as Vielhorsky died in 1839. Gogol left an account of this time in his *Nights at the Villa*. "if my death could restore him to health, with what readiness I would have rushed toward it!"

Pushkin's death produced a strong impression on Gogol. His principal work during years following Pushkin's death was the satirical epic *Dead Souls*. Concurrently, he worked at other tasks – recast Taras Bulba and The Portrait, completed his second comedy, Marriage (Zhenitba), wrote the fragment Rome and his most famous short story, The Overcoat.

In 1841 the first part of *Dead Souls* was ready, and Gogol took it to Russia to supervise its printing. It appeared in Moscow in 1842, under the title, imposed by the censorship, of *The Adventures of Chichikov*. The book instantly established his reputation as the greatest prose writer in the language.

Creative decline and death

After the triumph of *Dead Souls*, Gogol's contemporaries came to regard him as a great satirist who lampooned the unseemly sides of Imperial Russia. Little did they know that *Dead Souls* was but the first part of a planned modern-day counterpart to The Divine Comedy of

Dante. The first part represented the Inferno; the second part would depict the gradual purification and transformation of the rogue Chichikov under the influence of virtuous publicans and governors – Purgatory.

In April 1848 Gogol returned to Russia from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and passed his last years in restless movement throughout the country. While visiting the capitals, he stayed with friends such as Mikhail Pogodin and Sergei Aksakov. During this period, he also spent much time with his old Ukrainian friends, Maksymovych and Osyp Bodiansky. He intensified his relationship with a starets or spiritual elder, Matvey Konstantinovsky, whom he had known for several years. Konstantinovsky seems to have strengthened in Gogol the fear of perdition by insisting on the sinfulness of all his imaginative work. Exaggerated ascetic practices undermined his health and he fell into a state of deep depression. On the night of 24 February 1852 he burned some of his manuscripts, which contained most of the second part of *Dead Souls*. He explained this as a mistake, a practical joke played on him by the Devil. Soon thereafter, he took to bed, refused all food, and died in great pain nine days later.

Gogol was mourned in the Saint Tatiana church at the Moscow University before his burial and then buried at the Danilov Monastery, close to his fellow Slavophile Aleksey Khomyakov. His grave was marked by a large stone (Golgotha), topped by a Russian Orthodox cross. In 1931 Moscow authorities decided to demolish the monastery and had Gogol's remains transferred to the Novodevichy Cemetery

His body was discovered lying face down; which gave rise to the story that Gogol had been buried alive. The authorities moved the Golgotha stone to the new gravesite, but removed the cross; in 1952 the Soviets replaced the stone with a bust of Gogol. The stone was later reused for the tomb of Gogol's admirer Mikhail Bulgakov. In 2009, in connection with the bicentennial of Gogol's birth, the bust was moved to the museum at Novodevichy Cemetery, and the original Golgotha stone was returned, along with a copy of the original Orthodox cross.

The first Gogol monument in Moscow, a Symbolist statue on Arbat Square, represented the sculptor Nikolay Andreyev's idea of Gogol rather than the real man.[16] Unveiled in 1909, the statue received praise from Ilya Repin and from Leo Tolstoy as an outstanding projection of Gogol's tortured personality. Joseph Stalin did not like it, however, and the statue was replaced by a more orthodox Socialist Realism monument in 1952. It took enormous efforts

to save Andreyev's original work from destruction; as of 2014 it stands in front of the house where Gogol died.

Style

D.S. Mirsky characterized Gogol's universe as "one of the most marvellous, unexpected – in the strictest sense, original – worlds ever created by an artist of words."

The other main characteristic of Gogol's writing is his impressionist vision of reality and people. He saw the outer world romantically metamorphosed, a singular gift particularly evident from the fantastic spatial transformations in his Gothic stories, A Terrible Vengeance and A Bewitched Place. His pictures of nature are strange mounds of detail heaped on detail, resulting in an unconnected chaos of things. His people are caricatures, drawn with the method of the caricaturist – which is to exaggerate salient features and to reduce them to geometrical pattern. But these cartoons have a convincingness, a truthfulness, and inevitability – attained as a rule by slight but definitive strokes of unexpected reality – that seems to beggar the visible world itself

The aspect under which the mature Gogol sees reality is expressed by the Russian word poshlost′, which means something similar to "triviality, banality, inferiority", moral and spiritual, widespread in some group or society. Like Sterne before him, Gogol was a great destroyer of prohibitions and romantic illusions. It was he who undermined Russian Romanticism by making vulgarity reign where only the sublime and the beautiful had reigned. "Characteristic of Gogol is a sense of boundless superfluity that is soon revealed as utter emptiness and a rich comedy that suddenly turns into metaphysical horror" His stories often interweave pathos and mockery, while "The Tale of How Ivan Ivanovich Quarreled with Ivan Nikiforovich" begins as a merry farce and ends with the famous dictum, "It is dull in this world, gentlemen!"

Politics

Gogol was stunned when The Government Inspector came to be interpreted by many, despite Nicholas I's patronage of the play, as an indictment of tsarism. In reality, Gogol himself was an adherent of the Slavophile movement and believed in a divinely inspired mission for both the House of Romanov and the Russian Orthodox Church. Similarly to Fyodor Dostoyevsky,

Gogol sharply disagreed with those Russians who preached constitutional monarchy and the disestablishment of the Orthodox Church.

After defending autocracy, serfdom, and the Orthodox Church in his book Selected Passages from Correspondence with his Friends, Gogol was attacked by his former patron Vissarion Belinsky. The first Russian intellectual to publicly preach the economic theories of Karl Marx, Belinsky accused Gogol of betraying his readership by defending the status quo.

Influence and interpretations

Even before the publication of *Dead Souls,* Belinsky recognized Gogol as the first realist writer in the language and the head of the Natural School, to which he also assigned such younger or lesser authors as Goncharov, Turgenev, Dmitry Grigorovich, Vladimir Dahl and Vladimir Sollogub. Gogol himself seemed to be skeptical about the existence of such a literary movement. Although he recognized "several young writers" who "have shown a particular desire to observe real life", he upbraided the deficient composition and style of their works Nevertheless, subsequent generations of radical critics celebrated Gogol (the author in whose world a nose roams the streets of the Russian capital) as a great realist, a reputation decried by the Encyclopædia Britannica as "the triumph of Gogolesque irony."

The period of modernism saw a revival of interest in and a change of attitude towards Gogol's work. One of the pioneering works of Russian formalism was Eichenbaum's reappraisal of The Overcoat. In the 1920s, a group of Russian short story writers, known as the Serapion Brothers, placed Gogol among their precursors and consciously sought to imitate his techniques. The leading novelists of the period – notably Yevgeny Zamyatin and Mikhail Bulgakov – also admired Gogol and followed in his footsteps. In 1926, Vsevolod Meyerhold staged The Government Inspector as a "comedy of the absurd situation", revealing to his fascinated spectators a corrupt world of endless self-deception. In 1934, Andrei Bely published the most meticulous study of Gogol's literary techniques up to that date, in which he analyzed the colours prevalent in Gogol's work depending on the period, his impressionistic use of verbs, expressive discontinuity of his syntax, complicated rhythmical patterns of his sentences, and many other secrets of his craft. Based on this work, Vladimir Nabokov published a summary account of Gogol's masterpieces in 1944.

Gogol's impact on Russian literature has been enduring, yet his works have been appreciated differently by various critics. Belinsky, for instance, berated his horror stories as "moribund, monstrous works", while Andrei Bely counted them among his most stylistically daring creations. Nabokov especially admired Dead Souls, The Government Inspector, and The Overcoat as works of genius, proclaiming that "when, as in his immortal 'The Overcoat,' Gogol really let himself go and pottered happily on the brink of his private abyss, he became the greatest artist that Russia has yet produced." The Overcoat was traditionally interpreted as a masterpiece of "humanitarian realism", but Nabokov and some other attentive readers argued that "holes in the language" make the story susceptible to interpretation as a supernatural tale about a ghostly double of a "small man." Of all Gogol's stories, The Nose has stubbornly defied all abstruse interpretations: D.S. Mirsky declared it "a piece of sheer play, almost sheer nonsense."

Gogol's oeuvre has also had a large impact on Russia's non-literary culture, and his stories have been adapted numerous times into opera and film. Russian Composer Alfred Schnittke wrote the eight part Gogol Suite as incidental music to The Government Inspector performed as a play, and composer Dmitri Shostakovich set The Nose as his first opera in 1930, despite the peculiar choice of subject for what was meant to initiate the great tradition of Soviet opera Most recently, to celebrate the 200th anniversary of Gogol's birth, Vienna's renowned Theater an der Wien commissioned music and libretto for a full length opera on the life of Gogol from Russian composer and writer Lera Auerbach.

Some attention has also been given to the apparent anti-Semitism in Gogol's writings, as well as those of his contemporary, Fyodor Dostoyevsky. Felix Dreizin and David Guaspari, for example, in their *The Russian Soul and the Jew: Essays in Literary Ethnocentricis* discuss "the significance of the Jewish characters and the negative image of the Ukrainian Jewish community in Gogol's novel *Taras Bulba*, pointing out Gogol's attachment to anti-Jewish prejudices prevalent in Russian and Ukrainian culture." In Leon Poliakov's *The History of Antisemitism*, the author mentions that "The 'Yankel' from *Taras Bulba* indeed became the archetypal Jew in Russian literature. Gogol painted him as supremely exploitative, cowardly, and repulsive, albeit capable of gratitude. But it seems perfectly natural in the story that he and his cohorts be drowned in the Dniper by the Cossack lords. Above all, Yankel is ridiculous, and the image of the plucked chicken that Gogol used has made the rounds of great Russian authors."

Despite his problematic portrayal of Jewish characters, Gogol left a powerful impression even on Jewish writers who inherited his literary legacy. Amelia Glaser has noted the influence of Gogol's literary innovations on Sholem Aleichem, who "chose to model much of his writing, and even his appearance, on Gogol... What Sholem Aleichem was borrowing from Gogol was a rural East European landscape that may have been dangerous, but could unite readers through the power of collective memory. He also learned from Gogol to soften this danger through laughter, and he often rewrites Gogol's Jewish characters, correcting anti-Semitic stereotypes and narrating history from a Jewish perspective."

3 Summary:

Once upon a time in a town called St. Petersburg, there was a low-ranking officially who was unfortunately named Akaky Akakievich Bashmachkin. Akaky was a poor guy, but he loved his job. In fact, he loved it so much that all he did when he went home every day was do more work. But there's a problem in this mundane fairy tale: Akaky's coat is falling apart. Simple solution, right? Patch it up and the story's over. Not so fast there, kiddo. This coat is beyond repair, and a new one will cost twice Akaky's salary. And don't forget—we're talking about Russia here, so just going without a coat is definitely not an option. What's he to do?

Akaky is an awkward loner. So even though he enjoys the party in theory, the noise, people, and drinking get to him. He leaves the shindig earlier than everyone else, but still later than he's ever gone home. As a poor man in 19th-century Russia, Akaky doesn't exactly live in a safe neighborhood. And you know what can happen to a guy with a fancy new coat in a dangerous neighborhood late at night. Akaky gets mugged. Now the craziness begins. Akaky goes from official to official trying to get someone to investigate the theft of his coat, but no one will work with him. Finally the last official is so mean to Akaky that he dejectedly walks home without a coat in the harsh Russian winter. He gets a throat infection, and two days later he dies.

The last official tries to make amends with Akaky a week later, but it's too late. He's dead. In order to cheer himself up, the official goes to a party. But on the way back from the party, he gets his coat stolen by Akaky's ghost. Ah, retribution at last.

Our protagonist Akaky Akakievich Bashmachkin. Now we know what you're thinking: No one in their right mind would name their child after poop. But really, his mom had no other

choice because the names his godparents chose just didn't sound right, whatever kind of excuse that is. So she named him after his dad, Akaky. And since -evich is the Russian version of -son, he became Akaky Akakievich. Totally reasonable. As far as anybody knows, Akaky was born in his uniform and had been an official ever since, *Benjamin Button*-style. Despite that, Akaky gets no respect. People act like he's not even there, and the younger officials make fun of him. None of this matters to Akaky, however, since he loves his job so much. One day, the younger officials stop Akaky from doing his work, and he yells at them to leave him alone. This blows one of the young official's minds, and from that day forward, he can never forget how inhumanely he treated Akaky. He loves his job, and even though he's basically a human Xerox machine, he treats his job like it's the best thing since sliced bread. He is totally content with his situation, even refusing a *slight* promotion from one of his directors. For him, it's copying or nothing.

When everyone else is out partying, eating, or having fun, Akaky is in his room copying papers. And he probably would have continued doing this for the rest of his life if he weren't so unlucky. Akaky lives in St. Petersburg, which is known for its crazy cold winters. Everyone in the city has to deal with the cold, but it's worse for people like Akaky who don't have enough money to buy a fancy warm coat. It's hard out there for a… human printer, in Akaky's case. Akaky owns an overcoat but he starts noticing that he feels cold in his back and shoulders on the way to work. One day, he suddenly realizes that his coat is basically a pile of rags. Of course, everyone else knew that already and even made fun of him for it, but Akaky is normally too busy copying letters to notice. This man's work ethic is something to admire, that's for sure. So he brings the coat to his tailor, Petrovich. Petrovich is not the kind of guy that we would choose to be our tailor. He drinks all the time, argues with his wife, can't seem to thread a needle, and on top of all that, he's angry. Not a good recipe.

Akaky hopes that Petrovich could just patch his coat a bit for only a couple of rubles, but no such luck. The coat is so old that it's literally falling apart. Petrovich isn't going near it. It's time for a new coat, but Akaky doesn't have the money. A new coat would cost 150 rubles, and that's just the basic model. When Akaky leaves Petrovich, he's in a daze. He doesn't even notice that trash is dumped on his head and he gets covered in soot. By the time he gets home Akaky calms down and thinks of a plan. He'll go back to Petrovich on Sunday, when he's still a little drunk and sleepy. That should work. Fast forward to Sunday, and Akaky is back at Petrovich's shop. Unfortunately, Akaky is very unlucky, and as soon as he mentions

the overcoat, Petrovich snaps out of his hangover. He's not budging. Akaky *has* to get a new coat, no if's, and's, or but's. Akaky's problem is that he has no money. Even though it's still pretty expensive for him, Akaky manages to negotiate Petrovich down to 80 rubles.

He already had 40 rubles saved up, so Akaky just lives a very simple and very cold life until he can get the other 40. Next, something out of the ordinary happens. Akaky decides to get the coat made, and even though he's kind of anxious, he looks forward to it. So much so that he makes a mistake in his work for the first time ever. This is the guy who even copies papers in his spare time. Then when it's time for Akaky's raise, he hits the jackpot. Instead of 40 rubles, he gets 60! Looks like it's coat o'clock for Akaky, no more frigid walks home in the cold Russian winter. They go to the store, get the best materials they can afford, and Petrovich works for two weeks making the coat. When it's done, he goes to Akaky and presents it to him like it's the royal jewels. It's the best day of Akaky's life. But then he gets to work. Everyone hears the news and starts complimenting him. At first he likes all the attention, but pretty soon it all becomes too much. He even starts saying that it's not a new coat at all, but to no avail. By the end of the day he's forced into going to a party to celebrate his new coat.

The guy throwing the party for Akaky's coat lives in the nice part of St. Petersburg, somewhere really far away from Akaky's house. So to get there, he has to walk forever across the dark, frozen city. As he gets closer to the nice neighborhood, he sees all of these beautiful clothes and advertisements that he has never seen before in his life. When he finally gets to this guy's house the party is already raging. Akaky acts just like you'd expect someone who's never been to a party to act: crazy awkward. Like a cow on a crutch. Even though the party is showing no signs of stopping, once midnight rolls around Akaky decides it's his bedtime and leaves without telling anyone. Akaky's still got a skip in his step on his long walk home until he arrives at his neighborhood. The sketchy neighborhood. As you probably guessed, he gets mugged in the street and his coat is stolen. He even faints. When he regains consciousness, Akaky screams bloody murder. He goes to the night watchman, but he's no help. He says to talk to the captain in the morning.

Akaky goes home a mess. His hair is in disarray and he's covered in snow…definitely not a good look. When the landlady sees him, she's shocked. After he tells her what happened to him, she suggests that he go straight to the superintendent, because the captain probably

won't do anything to help. So, that's exactly what poor, coatless Akaky does, but not without difficulty. At first, the superintendent's clerks don't let him in. They only cave when he threatens to report them, but even then, when he talks to the superintendent it seems like he's the one being questioned instead of being helped. All this makes Akaky pretty depressed. He doesn't even go to work, which is a pretty big deal knowing how much he loves his job. When he goes in the next day, he wears his old sloppy coat, and while lots of people feel bad for him, others still make fun of him and no one really helps. One guy tells him that he has to go speak to "a certain prominent personage." We don't know who this prominent personage is, or what he does, but Akaky decides to go see him anyway. This seems like a horrible idea for a couple of reasons: 1) this mystery man seems to be obsessed with making himself seem prominent, 2) he only makes himself seem prominent by being strict and mean, and 3) he is even stricter and meaner to low-ranking people like Akaky. This isn't going to be pretty.

By the time that Akaky finally gets to talk to this certain "prominent personage," the dude is really in the mood to show off how mean he can be. It must be hard being so prominent. By just coming to his office, Akaky has somehow insulted him. He yells at Akaky, who stands silently and doesn't even know what to say. This guy continues to lay into Akaky so hard that our sad, coatless hero faints yet again. By the time Akaky wakes up, he has no idea what's going on. He walks home in the terrible St. Petersburg winter without a coat and ends up developing quinsy, an infection of the throat that swells until you can't breathe. The prognosis is not good. He'll be dead in less than two days.

After developing the infection, Akaky turns into a different man. He's delusional and raves in his sleep about the overcoat. He even curses, which he's never done in his life. Then, he finally dies. Akaky doesn't leave anything behind. The guys at his work don't even know he's dead until they ask why he hasn't come in lately. Once they learn of Akaky's fate, they promptly replace him with someone else.

Suddenly, there's a rumor around town that a ghost has started appearing at night and stealing people's coats right off their backs. The police try to catch him, but (duh) he's a ghost. Then there's that "prominent personage," the guy who yelled at Akaky and made him faint. After everything that happened, he starts to feel bad about what he did to Akaky. By the

time he tries to help him, however, Akaky is already dead. To take his mind off of how horribly he treated a cold, sad, and now deceased man, the prominent personage goes to a party and then pays a visit to a certain lady friend. The sort of visit that you might call adultery, but, hey, who are we to judge. Everything's going great until suddenly, the personage feels something around his collar. It's Akaky, and he wants the dude's coat. Akaky grabs the coat, and the prominent personage escapes in his carriage as fast as he can, we imagine with his tail tucked between his legs. It's not every day you get jumped by a ghost, after all. Instead of going to see his lady friend, he goes straight home and is so freaked out that he won't tell anyone what happened.

A curious thing happens after this event, however: the personage starts to act less like a jerk. More importantly, the ghost is gone. We guess the personage's coat fit Akaky perfectly. Even after Akaky's reign of terror ends, people keep seeing ghosts. But they definitely aren't Akaky, since they are too tall, too huge, and too moustachioed. Seriously now, it might seem super obvious why Gogol named his story "The Overcoat." But why didn't he name it "Akaky," or "The Prominent Personage," or even "The Ghost"? That's because the coat is the most important thing in the whole story. Without the coat, we wouldn't even have a story because Akaky would still be copying letters in blissful contentment.

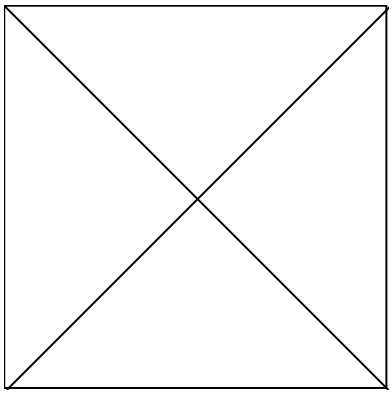
The overcoat is what disrupts things. When his old coat falls apart, Akaky desires a new fancy coat. His desires cause him to climb up the social ladder. And when his precious coat is taken away from him, his desire to have it back is what leads to his downfall.

4 Analysis:

If there's one thing that Gogol is known for, it's comedy (even though most of the time that comedy turns into horror by the end of the story, like with Akaky's ghost, but it still counts). Gogol's comedy often stems from his satirization of Russian culture. This story is no different.

From the very first line of the overcoat, Gogol lets us know how he feels about Russian bureaucracy:

They say that, quite recently, a complaint was received from a justice of the peace, in which he plainly demonstrated that all the imperial institutions were going to the dogs, and that his sacred name was being taken in vain; and in proof he appended to the complaint a huge volume of some romantic composition, in which the justice of the peace appears about once in every ten lines, sometimes in a drunken condition. (1)



The point of a satire is to highlight the excesses, ills, and general ridiculousness of a culture. Today we might satirize people's tendencies to obsess over their smartphones or social media accounts, but in Gogol's day people were really caught up with the social hierarchy in bureaucratic departments. If you ask us, we'd choose Facebook over that any day.

Gogol's dry humor is peppered throughout "The Overcoat," like at Akaky's baptism, where "[...]they christened the child, whereat he wept, and made a grimace, as though he foresaw that he was to be a titular councilor" (5). It's moments like this that make us laugh in the midst of the otherwise rather bleak story.

Let's talk about Naturalism. It's a literary genre that grew out of realism, which was seriously obsessed with depicting everyday situations as they really were, right down to the nitty-gritty details. The difference? Naturalists felt that their characters were heavily influenced by outside forces like social conditions, environment, and genetics. Naturalist stories also tend to be pessimistic and have "objective" narrators.

You're probably pretty familiar with this style of writing, so it's nothing new to you. But think about this: in Gogol's time the majority of Russian literature was poetry and the prose, far from the realistic, dare we say…conversational…tone Gogol is known for. Gogol seemed positively avant-garde with his (mostly) pessimistic story about a boring little clerk overwhelmed by society's rules. His influence on the authors after him is so strong that he's

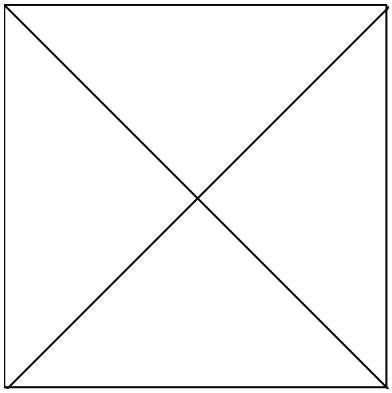
probably the reason Russian literature is known for being so pessimistic. Everyone from Dostoyevsky to Tolstoy just hopped on Gogol's Naturalism train. These guys were definitely the original emo kids.

Last up, let's take a moment to examine "The Overcoat" as a parable. A parable is normally a short and simple story meant to deliver some kind of life lesson. They often focus on a character facing some kind of moral dilemma, follows them through the decision that they make, and describes the consequences. Akaky is faced with a dilemma that doesn't seem moral at first glance, but gets pretty deep pretty fast once you look further into the meaning of the story. Akaky makes a decision, and that decision impacts everything else that happens in the story. At least half of "The Overcoat" is just describing the fallout from Akaky's decision to buy a new overcoat. The lesson here? Don't buy a new coat; or in other words, don't be envious of high social ranking. And get used to freezing your butt off in the cold Russian winter.

First Person (Peripheral Narrator):

You might be tempted to think that this is a story told in the third person, but you have to look carefully. Even though the narrator seems objective at times, there are moments that betray him. For example: "Akaky Akakievich was born, if my memory fails me not, towards night on the 23d of March" (4). Doesn't that sound like some guy you just met is trying to tell you a story? A third person narrator doesn't have to check his memory and doesn't use words like "I" or "my."

Now that we have that settled, let's talk about *skaz*. Skaz is a Russian term for an unreliable narrator. The term skaz comes from the Russian word skazat, or "to tell," and it's a reference to oral storytelling.



Unless you listened to it on tape, "The Overcoat" is clearly not an oral story, but the narrator tells it as if it is. Whether we like it or not, the narrator goes into detail about completely insignificant things. He makes jokes with us, and his storytelling sometimes gets off-track, just like you'd expect if somebody were telling you about Akaky from memory. All of this gives the narrator a distinct personality and adds comedy to the story.

Perhaps the easiest way to see the impact the narrator has on the story would be to imagine what it would be like from another point of view. If "The Overcoat" were told from Akaky's point of view, it would probably be much more boring, depressing, and cause us to totally sympathize with him instead of laugh at him a little. If the story were told from the prominent personage's perspective, we might have only had a paragraph about a strange old man named Akaky in a pompous self-monologue of a story. Even if "The Overcoat" were written in an objective third person, it would have been different because it would not have the comedic asides and humorous omissions that our first person narrator inserts.

In other words, this perspective is important because it makes the story. If anyone else told it, it wouldn't be "The Overcoat."

It's Hard out There for a Bureaucrat

Nikolai Gogol grew up in hard times for Russia. When he was 17 years old in 1825, a group of revolutionaries called the Decembrists tried to overthrow the czarist regime. Of course they were crushed, but the whole affair shook up the Russian populace. It also made the next czar, Nicholas I, very strict. As a result he changed up the whole Russian bureaucracy.

Before we tell you how he changed it, you should know that it was already pretty complicated. The bureaucracy was divided into three types of service: civil, military, and court. Then those three types of service had 14 grades of officers, each with their own style of address. Peter the Great conceived this whole thing in 1722, because what's a great government without a complicated and circuitous bureaucracy?

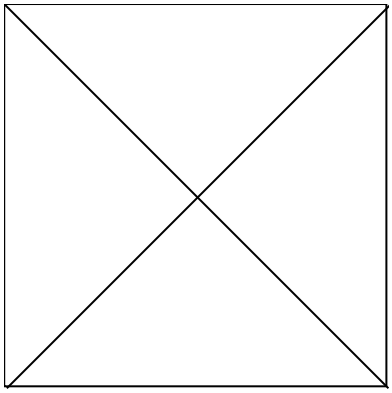
To put that into context, rank one was the highest position you could get. The prominent personage was probably rank six, seven, or eight. And Akaky? He's just a lowly titular councilor. His rank didn't even have a number.

Following the Decembrist's failed coup, Czar Nicholas I gave the Russian bureaucracy a pretty big makeover. He took the aristocracy out of the bureaucracy, causing all sorts of shifts in the ranks, so by the time that Gogol applied for a job as a bureaucrat in 1828, the whole bureaucracy was in a state of unrest. With all this awkward reorganization, the Russian government didn't sound like a very fun place to work during this time, and we can see why Gogol paints such a poor picture of Russian government officials in "The Overcoat."

Winter in St. Petersburg, Russia

Ah, St. Petersburg, the city established by Czar Peter the Great in an attempt to make 18th-century Russia more like Amsterdam. As the imperial capital of Russia, the city was teeming with officials just like Akaky, but that's not what Gogol tells us is important to the story. Instead, it's the weather. The narrator says:

At the hour when the foreheads of even those who occupy exalted positions ache with the cold, and tears start to their eyes, the poor titular councilors are sometimes unprotected. Their only salvation lies in traversing as quickly as possible, in their thin little overcoats, five or six streets, and then warming their feet well in the porter's room, and so thawing all their talents and qualifications for official service, which had become frozen on the way. (17)



The average temperature of St. Petersburg in the winter is 12°F. In 1883 it even hit a record low of -25.6°F. No wonder Akaky got so sick when he went home without his coat. At those temperatures he could literally freeze to death in the streets. In some other countries it might be silly to write a whole story about a coat, but it's obvious that in St. Petersburg owning a good overcoat is a big deal.

We're not in Nevsky Prospect Anymore, Toto

The story is set in the capital of Russia would be full of the glitz and glamor of city life, but Gogol is no F. Scott Fitzgerald. Remember, Akaky is a poor low-ranking official, and even though he lives in the city, he can't take advantage of all the culture and shopping it has to offer him. Gogol made this clear to readers by contrasting the neighborhood Akaky lives in with the neighborhood of the official who throws the party. The narrator says:

Akaky Akakievich was first obliged to traverse a sort of wilderness of deserted, dimly lighted streets; but in proportion as he approached the official's quarter of the city, the streets became more lively, more populous, and more brilliantly illuminated. (71)

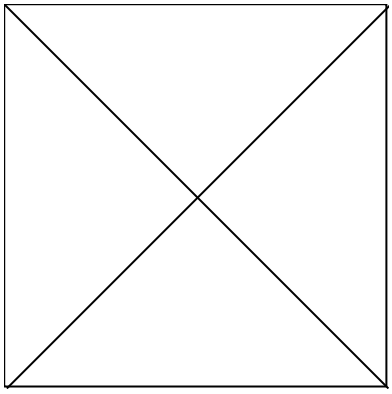
It's almost like he's entering a different world, but it's just the nice part of town. We can tell Akaky probably didn't get out of the house much. Akaky's story points out that even in a regal city like St. Petersburg, there are poor people who have very little. It's likely that if Akaky didn't live in such an impoverished part of town, he never would have had his coat stolen in the first place. The juxtaposition is even more biting because just down the street, people are spending money and having a good time without a single thought for the little people like him.

Prose; Simple, Rambling

Duh it's prose, we hear you say. Normally that might be the case, but Russian literature was going through some interesting times when Gogol was writing. Before the 1830s the majority of Russian literature was poetry, not prose (the stuff you find in novels), so it was pretty revolutionary for him to write this way. Not only that, but he ended up being one of a group of authors who actually pioneered what many people think of as Russian literature today. Pretty impressive, if you ask us.

Russian literature is characterized by fairly simple, straightforward language. For example:

They began to congratulate him, and to say pleasant things to him, so that he began at first to smile, and then he grew ashamed. (66)



We are going to guess that there are almost no words that you aren't familiar with. People don't *laude* him or make *susurrus* in his ear. There's probably a reason for that. Akaky is a simple man, and he can barely make sentences, let alone pronounce complex words. So the writing style puts us in the mind frame of a simple guy just like him.

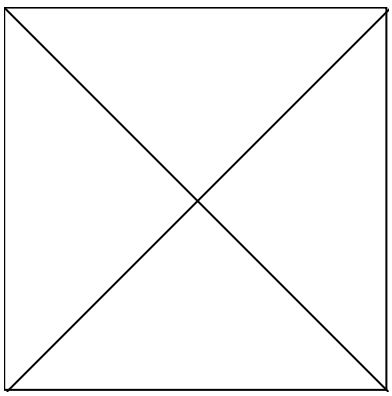
Oh, and one more thing. "The Overcoat" contains one of the most famous examples of the periodic sentence. It's a writing style that emphasizes its point by putting the main idea at the end of a long sentence full of subordinate clauses and modifiers. It's one of the rare times where the writing style goes from being simple to being crazy complex. Here it is, in all its long-winded glory:

Even at the hour when the gray Petersburg sky had quite disappeared, and all the world of officials had eaten or dined, each as he could, in accordance with the salary he received, and his own fancy; when all were resting from the departmental jar of pens, running to and fro, their own and other people's indispensable occupations and all the work that an uneasy man makes willingly for himself, rather than what is necessary; when officials hasten to dedicate to pleasure the time that is left to them —one bolder than the rest goes to the theater; another, into the streets, devoting it to the inspection of some bonnets; one wastes his evening in compliments to some pretty girl, the star of a small official circle; one—and this is the most common case of all—goes to his comrades on the fourth or third floor, to two small rooms with an ante-room or kitchen, and some pretensions to fashion, a lamp or some other trifle which has cost many a sacrifice of dinner or excursion—in a word, even at the hour when all officials disperse among the contracted quarters of their friends, to play at whist, as they sip their tea from glasses with a kopek's worth of sugar, draw smoke through long pipes, relating at times some bits of gossip which a Russian man can never, under any circumstances, refrain from, or even when there is nothing to say, recounting everlasting anecdotes about the commandant whom they had sent to inform that the tail of the horse on

the Falconet Monument- had been cut off—in a word, even when all strive to divert themselves, Akaky Akakievich yielded to no diversion. (15)

Gogol tells us about everything the people of St. Petersburg do in such great detail, making a *huge* sentence just to emphasize how Akaky doesn't do anything besides work in his free time. When you see all of the fun that he could be having, it really hits home. The sentence illustrates a bustling crowd of people and brings the city to life, but Akaky is still all alone at the very end of the sentence. Not only is he isolated in life, but the very writing style of the story repeats his isolation.

But many active and apprehensive persons could by no means reassure themselves, and asserted that the dead official still showed himself in distant parts of the city. And, in fact, one watchman in Kolomna saw with his own eyes the apparition come from behind a house; but being rather weak of body—so much so, that once upon a time an ordinary full-grown pig running out of a private house knocked him off his legs, to the great amusement of the surrounding public coachmen, from whom he demanded a groschen apiece for snuff, as damages—being weak, he dared not arrest him, but followed him in the dark, until, at length, the apparition looked round, paused, and inquired, "What do you want?" and showed such a fist as you never see on living men. The watchman said, "It's of no consequence," and turned back instantly. But the apparition was much too tall, wore huge mustaches, and, directing its steps apparently towards the Obukhoff Bridge, disappeared in the darkness of the night. (116)



It might seem super obvious why Gogol named his story "The Overcoat." But why didn't he name it "Akaky," or "The Prominent Personage," or even "The Ghost"? That's because the coat is the most important thing in the whole story. Without the coat, we wouldn't even have a story because Akaky would still be copying letters in blissful contentment.

The overcoat is what disrupts things. When his old coat falls apart, Akaky desires a new fancy coat. His desires cause him to climb up the social ladder. And when his precious coat is taken away from him, his desire to have it back is what leads to his downfall. So yeah, it's a story about a guy with a coat. A really important coat.

Titular councilors, Collegiate Assessors, Chancellors, and the whole nine yards. The world of "The Overcoat" is awash in governmental officials. Everyone has to tread carefully in order not to offend the people above and below them. Why is this so important? We don't know. But we *do* know that the rules of politics are strong enough in "The Overcoat" to cause one man's death.Working in a government department in St. Petersburg is an official known as a perpetual titular councillor. He is a short, red-haired man with a receding hairline and a ruddy complexion. Others in the department cannot remember when he began working there or who appointed him. It was as if he was born at his desk.

His name is Akakiy Akakievitch Bashmatchkin, a surname derived from *bashmak*, meaning shoe. Akakiy gets no respect from his superiors or anyone else in his office. Even the porter refuses to rise when he passes. A supervisor sometimes tosses a document on his desk without offering a pleasantry or even saying, “Copy it.” But Akakiy copies it just the same. The younger fellows in the office tell stories about him–that his landlady beats him, for example. Sometimes they rip up paper and drop the pieces over his head, calling it snow. Usually, Akakiy ignores them as he continues to do his work. However, if his taunters go too far, he says, “Leave me alone! Why do you insult me?” Akakiy loves his work, for which he receives a salary of four hundred rubles. And he is good at it. When his pen moves against paper, he smiles and works his lips. A department director decided one day to give him a special assignment: to alter a letter, changing a heading and a few words, not merely copy the document. However, this project so tasked Akakiy that he asked only for copy work. Now, that is all his superiors give him, copy work. Akakiy is not particularly careful about his personal appearance, for there is always something clinging to his uniform, such as a piece of hay or fuzz. When on the street, he tends to walk under a window just when someone is tossing out waste, so that he might enter his office with a melon rind on his hat.

.....At home after a day’s work, he eats cabbage soup and maybe a little beef and onions. Then, while all the other workers are enjoying their time off by going to the theatre, playing cards, chasing pretty girls, smoking pipes, or otherwise entertaining themselves, Akakiy sits down and eagerly copies papers he has brought home with him. If he is all caught up, he copies another paper anyway, just for the pleasure of it. Then he goes to bed, content.

However, one day, his back and shoulders begin to bother him. The problem, he determines, is his cloak. It is worn too thin in the back to protect him against the icy northern wind that blows through the city each morning. So frayed is it that he can actually see through it. The lining is coming apart. His coworkers make fun of it, calling it a cape instead of a cloak. Akakiy decides to take it to a tailor, Petrovitch, who keeps shop in an apartment on the fourth floor of a building with a dark staircase. He has only one eye, but he does good work when he is sober. Petrovitch was once a serf named Grigoriy, but he began calling himself Petrovitch after he received his liberation papers. He used to drink only on major holidays. However, in keeping with family tradition, he now drinks on all church festivals as well. If a cross appears on a day in a church calender, he drinks. His wife, whom he calls a "low female and a German," wears a cap and dress and has a face that no one is particularly interested in looking at.

After Akakiy enters the apartment, he passes through a smoky kitchen where Petrovitch's wife has been frying fish. Akakiy finds Petrovitch in the next room seated on a table as he tries to thread a needle. Akakiy had previously decided he would pay no more than two rubles for the work. When Petrovitch greets him,.....After he begins his money-saving campaign, he doesn't really mind it that much. Whenever he feels deprived, he thinks of his new cloak. It is like a new friend or even a wife. Then he thinks maybe it should have a fur collar. Once a month, he stops at Petrovitch's to discuss the cloak.

One day, Akakiy receives a wonderful surprise–a pay raise to sixty rubles. Perhaps the director was aware that he needed a new cloak. Or maybe it was just good luck. Two months later, with his continued frugality, Akakiy has eighty rubles. So he goes shopping with Petrovitch, and they select a fine cloth for the cloak. For lining, they choose a cotton so thick that Akakiy thinks it better than silk. Because the marten fur is too expensive, they decide on cat fur for the collar. In addition to the expenses for these items, Petrovitch charges twelve rubles for the labor after spending two weeks making the cloak. He delivers it himself just as extremely cold weather is setting in. Its arrival is a glorious moment for Akakiy–and Petrovitch, who points out what a bargain it is. Akakiy agrees and pays the tailor in full, then goes directly to work. When he enters the office, everyone inspects his new cloak and congratulates him. Someone suggests that he hold a "christening" party for it after work. He is pleased but very embarrassed. Then a supervisor butts in and invites everyone to his home instead to celebrate his birthday. They all accept the invitation and say it would be discourteous if Akakiy did not also accept it. So he does. Besides, he would have another opportunity to wear his new cloak.

At home after dinner, he spends time admiring his new cloak and comparing it with the old one, then leaves for the supervisor's residence, located in an apartment on the second floor of a building in an upscale part of the city. There he encounters well-dressed ladies and men attired in coats with otter-skin collars. Upon entering the supervisor's apartment, he notices the array of coats and cloaks hung up along the walls. Some have beaver collars. After hanging up his own cloak, he enters an inner room, where there are lights, card tables, and lively conversations. After his coworkers greet him with a shout, they go into the ante-room to look at his cloak, then return to the card tables to play whist.

Akakiy is not sure what to do next. So he sits down to watch the card games. Eventually, he grows weary, since it is past his bedtime, but the men say he must drink champagne in celebration of his new cloak. After they all eat a sumptuous meal, they serve him two glasses of champagne. He feels a bit more chipper, but at midnight he decides he has had enough. When he goes out for his cloak, he finds it on the floor. After brushing it off, he puts it on and leaves. The streets in the neighborhood are bright and cheerful in the falling snow, putting Akakiy in a good mood. But later, when he approaches his own section of the city, the lights dim and the buildings become plain and dreary. Entering a square, he begins to worry about his safety, "as though his heart had warned him of some evil." Just ahead, he sees bearded men. One of them says, "The cloak is mine!" He grabs at the collar while a second man punches Akakiy in the mouth. Then they take his cloak and disappear. When Akakiy recovers, he shouts for help and runs to the nearest watch box. There he lodges a complaint, and the watchman tells him to go the police the next day. After Akakiy runs home and informs his landlady of his misfortune, she advises him to report the theft to the district police chief himself–whom she knows–and not to a subordinate, who would only promise to investigate, then do nothing.

.....At the district chief's office early the next morning, Akakiy presents his complaint. Officials there tell him the chief is still asleep. When Akakiy returns at ten o'clock, they tell him the chief is still asleep. When he returns at eleven, they tell him the chief is out. At noon, Akakiy asserts himself and demands to see the chief. Finally, the chief hears his story. However, he treats Akakiy as if he had committed a wrong, asking why he was out so late and whether he had been to a brothel. Akakiy goes home wondering whether the police are on his side. For the first time in his life, he misses a day of work.

.When he enters his office the next day, he is wearing his old cape. After hearing his story, a few of his coworkers cannot pass up the opportunity to ridicule him. Others take up a

collection for him. However, because many of them have already committed money for a director's portrait and for the purchase of a book recommended by a department head, Akakiy receives only a pittance. One coworker advises him not to rely on the police. If they track down the cloak, he says, Akakiy may have a difficult time proving that it is his. Instead, he says, Akakiy should lay his case before a certain "prominent personage" who would speedily attend to it. This person had only recently become prominent. Before that, he had been an "insignificant personage." This person sternly rules an office of ten persons, often asking them these questions: "How dare you?" "Do you know whom you are speaking to?" "Do you realize who stands before you?"

After Akakiy arrives, the prominent personage is talking with an old friend on matters of little importance. But he makes Akakiy wait in an ante-room just to demonstrate to his friend that he has the power to make people wait. When he finally receives Akakiy, the latter explains deferentially what had happened. The prominent personage tells Akakiy that he should first have lodged a complaint "at the court below" so that it could go through the proper channels: the department head, the chief of the division, and a secretary, who would refer the matter to him. He scolds Akakiy so roundly that the latter almost faints. Akakiy leaves in a daze.

On his way home through a snowstorm, he catches quinsy and by the next day is delirious with a burning fever. After a doctor examines him, he predicts to the landlady that Akakiy will be dead in thirty-six hours and tells her to order a pine coffin for the poor fellow. In his delirium, Akakiy imagines that cloak robbers are under his bed. Then he has a vision of himself standing before the prominent personage and saying, "Forgive me, your excellency!" However, a moment later he curses violently, shocking his landlady, and then lapses into gibberish and dies. There are no heirs to receive his property–some goose quills and paper, three pairs of socks, some buttons, and the old cloak. His is taken out and buried. Not until four days later do officials at his office hear about his death. An official with slanted handwriting takes his place. In the ensuing days, a rumor spreads that a dead man has been appearing on and near Kalinkin Bridge looking for a stolen cloak. Whenever anyone wearing a cloak passes, the dead man strips it away, claiming it is his. One department official actually sees the dead man and recognizes him as Akakiy. Terribly frightened, he runs off as fast as he can. Complaints mount throughout the city about stolen cloaks and cold shoulders. Police vow to catch the corpse dead or alive and punish him severely to set an example. A watchman and two comrades nearly catch him when he is stealing the cloak of a retired musician, but the watchman's snuff–which he takes out to refresh his nose during the apprehension–causes the corpse to sneeze into the eyes of his would-be captors, and he

escapes. Thereafter, watchmen in the city pass their hours on the job in mortal terror of the dead man.

Meanwhile, the prominent personage who had shouted at Akakiy feels remorseful when he finds out that Akakiy has died of a fever. To lift his spirits, he decides one day to go to a party at the house of a friend, where he spends a pleasant evening topped off with champagne. After the party, he decides not to go directly home but to visit a certain lady of his acquaintaince, Karolina Ivanovna. Such a nocturnal visit does not imply that he has a troubled family life. In fact, he has an attractive wife, two sons–one of whom is already in government service–and a pretty daughter.

On the way in his coach, he feels a tug on his collar. Turning around he sees Akakiy, who says, "I need your cloak; you took no trouble about mine, but reprimanded me; so now give up your own." Terrified, he throws off his cloak and orders his driver to make for his home at full speed. The next day, his daughter comments on how pale he looks. But he says nothing about what happened the night before. At his office, he is now less stern and doesn't often say "How dare you?"

Meanwhile, reported sightings of the dead man die down. Perhaps the prominent personage's cloak fits just right and the corpse has ended his search. However, a few people still claim he appears in different parts of the city. Then one day, one watchman actually sees the corpse emerge from behind a house and follows it. When the corpse asks, "What do you want?" the watchman says, "It's of no consequence." The corpse then walks off while the watchman goes in the opposite direction.

5 Characters

Akakiy Akakievitch Bashmatchkin: Bureaucrat in one of the departments of the Russian government in St. Petersburg, the nation's capital city. Bashmatchkin, about fifty, is a quiet, self-effacing man with red hair and a receding hairline. His job is to copy documents such as letters. Although he enjoys his work and never makes a mistake, he has no desire to take on more challenging work, realizing that he has limited capabilities. Because he is meek and dresses shabbily, most of his coworkers regard him as a nobody and frequently pick on him. When his cloak becomes so frayed that it can no longer protect him against the bitter cold, he dedicates himself to saving enough money to purchase a new cloak.

A Nobody:

Akaky Akakievich Bashmachkin might just be the most insignificant and mocked protagonist in literary history. Sure, there are lots of other protagonists who start out as losers, but most of those guys transform into the heroes *before* they die. Not Akaky. Akaky is a loser through and through.

He's ugly, old, poor, and he can't even muster up enough courage to finish his sentences when he's talking to people. Talk about awkward. Most importantly, he is a low-ranking official. That means no one gives him any respect, despite the fact he is strangely, though admirably, dedicated to his job.

That *Name*

You might have noticed that Akaky has a pretty strange name. In certain translations, it's even spelled with two i's (Akakii), making it look that much weirder. The narrator tells us that Akaky got his name because it was the least ridiculous of the names that his godparents suggested to his mother when he was born. We guess godparents must have had a pretty big say in naming babies in Russia back then, because why else would any parent in their right mind choose a name like Akaky?

All of the "K" and "ak" sounds make it pretty funny to say, don't they? So on one level, Gogol probably just thought his name sounded funny. Oh, and sounding just like kaka (poop) is an added plus.

The two other theories are a bit more complex. One suggests that Akaky's name is a reference to St. Acacius, a priest who was famous for living as simply as Akaky does. We kind of guess that would be an obscure reference. The other theory is that the name comes from the Greek akakia, which means innocent, simple, and gentle. That sure sounds like Akaky, doesn't it?

In short stories the author often has to convey a lot of information very quickly, and Gogol does some pretty heavy lifting through Akaky's name. He lets us know that Akaky is kind of ridiculous, and makes fun of him in the same breath that he is (possibly) compared to a saint. That's a great set up for understanding Akaky's role in the rest of the story. Even though he's lame, we can't help but think that he's the most moral character in the whole story.

Timeless

You know what doesn't change? Dead things. And Akaky. For much of the story Akaky doesn't change a bit. According to his coworkers, he never went through puberty; he was born a fully-grown adult. The narrator says:

However much the directors and chiefs of all kinds were changed, he was always to be seen in the same place, the same attitude, the same occupation—the same official for letters; so that afterwards it was affirmed that he had been born in undress uniform with a bald spot on his head. (5)

While everyone around him changes and grows up, Akaky remains the same. It's kind of creepy. Someone might say that this is because he has no friends and no one cares about him, but they'd be wrong. When he is given an opportunity to change, Akaky refuses. The narrator tells us:

One director being a kindly man, and desirous of rewarding him for his long service, ordered him to be given something more important than mere copying [...] This caused him so much toil, that he was all in a perspiration, rubbed his forehead, and finally said, "No, give me rather something to copy." After that they let him copy on forever. (11)

People who don't want to change are content, and at this stage in the story Akaky is content with his lot in life. And remember how we said that dead things don't change? Well, Akaky is so static, unemotional, and unremarkable that we wouldn't be surprised if someone compared him to a ghost. Luckily for us, we get to see Akaky become a ghost later in the story. What is Akaky like when he's a ghost? How does Akaky's static nature in the world of the living contrast with what happens once he dies? Keep these questions in mind when you think about these next two sections.

Coat Fetishist

With how excited he gets over this coat, you would almost think that Akaky is a fashionista or something like that. This guy doesn't get excited about *anything*, so what's the deal with this coat?

First of all, let's look at his old coat. It's so threadbare and worn that his coworkers don't even call it a "coat." They refer to it as a "hood." On top of that, Akaky doesn't take very good care of it. The narrator says:

He thought not at all of his clothes: his undress uniform was not green, but a sort of rusty-meal color. [...] And something was always sticking to his uniform—either a piece of hay or some trifle. Moreover, he had a peculiar knack, as he walked in the street, of arriving beneath a window when all sorts of rubbish was being flung out of it: hence he always bore about on his hat melon and watermelon rinds, and other such stuff. (12)

Unless wearing trash in your hat is new "in" thing, Akakki doesn't sound like someone who cares about his looks. That sounds like someone who could care less what people think about his clothing, since he doesn't care either. That all changes when the coat arrives. Even when he's just making the plans with Petrovich, Akaky's personality is already changing. We see it happen right before our eyes: "'A hundred and fifty rubles for an overcoat!' shrieked poor Akaky Akakievich—shrieked perhaps for the first time in his life, for his voice had always been distinguished for its softness" (44). That's just the first sign of what's to come. Bit by bit, he changes from a static, meek official to someone who actually seems to have normal wants and desires.

When he finally gets the coat, Akaky comes alive. It's easy to miss this line, but the narrator tells us: "His heart, generally so quiet, began to beat" (60). In other words, before Akaky's heart did not beat and he was dead. The coat made him a real living person. That's not the only change that happens to our unfortunately named protagonist. Suddenly he cares about his fashion, and relishes in every opportunity to show off his new coat. He even (gasp!) goes to a party with other people and kind of likes it. If only everyone's life could be so radically changed by a new coat.

But there's also a weird side to all of this self-improvement. We think that Akaky might be in love with his new coat. Now, before you call us crazy, hear us out think about how Akaky feels about his coat:

From that time forth, his existence seemed to become, in some way, fuller, as if he were married, as if some other man lived in him, as if he were not alone, and some charming friend had consented to go along life's path with him—and the friend was no other than that overcoat, with thick wadding and a strong lining incapable of wearing out. (57)

And it's not just that Akaky has a weird attachment to his coat. Didn't seem strange to you that he has no interest in women until after he gets the coat? On the way to the party he stares

at an advertisement showing a beautiful woman, and on the way back, he chases after a woman on the street. That sounds an awful lot like someone who has love on the brain. His coat makes him feel this way because it is the first thing that has brought change into his life. He's not a dead office drone living the same humdrum life anymore. He an important guy with a new overcoat.

For Akaky, love, change, desire, and advancement are all wrapped up in the image of his coat. It could have been a lady, it could have been a pet, but Akaky falls in love with his overcoat. And we all know the bad things happen when you separate a man with the thing he loves.

Akaky, the Un-friendly Ghost

This guy is a *real* protagonist. He's got a goal, he's got emotions, and he makes things happen. All Akaky had to do in order to come alive was die. The transformation that began when Akaky ordered his coat is completed in his death. He becomes someone who is almost unrecognizable. Before his death, one of Akaky's most notable traits is his stuttering speech, but he suddenly sounds quite different while on his deathbed:

[...] he fancied that he was standing before the general, listening to a thorough setting-down, and saying, "Forgive, your excellency!" but at last he began to curse, uttering the most horrible words, so that his aged landlady crossed herself, never in her life having heard anything of the kind from him—the more so, as those words followed directly after the words your excellency. (99)

That's the same guy who fainted when somebody yelled at him a little too much. But wait, he still not dead yet. Everything changes when Akaky becomes a ghost. He means business. The narrator says:

A rumor suddenly spread throughout Petersburg that a dead man had taken to appearing on the Kalinkin Bridge, and far beyond, at night, in the form of an official seeking a stolen coat, and that, under the pretext of its being the stolen coat, he dragged every one's coat from his shoulders without regard to rank or calling—cat—skin, beaver, wadded, fox, bear, raccoon coats; in a word, every sort of fur and skin which men adopted. (103)

Akaky isn't scared of high-ranking officials anymore. In fact, he doesn't seem to be scared of anyone. He doesn't care if you are high-ranking, low-ranking, or in between. He's just angry. Now it's everyone else who's afraid of him.

The Devil Himself

Did you ever notice how many times the devil is referenced when the narrator is talking about Petrovich? Go back and check. It's kinda suspicious isn't it? Those references aren't just there for fun; they're trying to tell us something: Petrovich is the devil.

If you were wondering why the only other named character in this story is the insignificant tailor, there's your answer. He's not just a tailor, but also the devil that is attempting to lure Akaky over to the dark side. Just like Darth Vader.

The signs are everywhere, but some of them are old-school and you might not notice them without some help. Back in the day, the devil was always characterized as having one eye, a tough toenail, and was often faceless. Petrovich also has one eye, a tough toenail, and he happens to have a snuffbox where the general has no face.

That's not even to mention that when we first meet him, he is shrouded in smoke. Hell fires, perhaps? Plus he engages in unchristian activities. The narrator says: "[He] began to drink heavily on all holidays, at first on the great ones, and then on all church festivals without discrimination, wherever a cross stood in the calendar" (20). Good Christians don't drink on the Sabbath, and especially not on high holy days. Petrovich, on the other hand, *only* drinks on those days.

Then of course, there are the times when the narrator almost straight-up tells us that he's Satan. For example: "Petrovich was in a sober condition, and therefore rough, taciturn, and inclined to demand, Satan only knows what price" (25). There is also this moment: "Petrovich's eye was very much askew, in fact, after Saturday: his head drooped, and he was very sleepy; but for all that, as soon as he knew what the question was, it seemed as though Satan jogged his memory" (52). There are many more moments, and we could quote them here but we think that you get the point. We hope that you're convinced, because that's important for the next point.

Tempter

Petrovich being Satan is only relevant because he tempts Akaky. Before going to Petrovich, Akaky is totally content with his life. He doesn't mind that he's poor, he doesn't mind that people make fun of him, and he doesn't even mind that people throw their trash on him. Not only that, but he loves his job, is really good at it, and isn't mean to anyone. If you think about it that way, Akaky is actually pretty decent and easygoing guy.

But Petrovich disrupts all that. Once he convinces Akaky that he needs a new coat, the lowly official starts to change. He's not content anymore. He's not dedicated to his job, and even starts making mistakes. In the end he's transformed into a vengeful spirit. That's basically the opposite of what he used to be.

Petrovich's path is the path to the dark side. Yoda would have told Akaky, "If once you start down the dark path, forever will it dominate your destiny, consume you it will." Instead of freaking out about his lost coat, he should have learned what Yoda tells his Jedi in training: "Attachment leads to jealousy. The shadow of greed, that is. Train yourself to let go of everything you fear to lose."

Petrovitch: One-eyed, heavy-drinking tailor whom Bashmatchkin hires to make his new cloak. Petrovitch was once a serf.

Wife of Petrovitch: Woman of plain looks whom the narrator says Petrovitch calls "a low female and a German" when they argue.

Bearded Assailants: Men who rob Akakiy of his new cloak.

Landlady of Bashmatchin: Elderly woman who advises Akakiy to report the theft of his cloak to the district police chief.

District Police Chief: Official who hears Akakiy's report about his stolen cloak. The

policeman asks Akakiy embarrassing questions, as if he were a criminal. The policeman is of no help.

Employee With Advice: Coworker of Akakiy who advises him to see a certain prominent personage in a government office who will help Akakiy track down his stolen cloak.

Prominent Personage: Bureaucrat mainly concerned with demonstrating the power he wields as a supervisor. He excoriates Akakiy for not going through the proper government channels to get an interview. He is of no help.

Physician: Doctor called after Akakiy develops a throat infection. He tells Akakiy's landlady to order a coffin.

Various Government Officials, Watchmen

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6 Themes

Bureaucratic and Class Oppression of the Common Man

As an employee of a government department, Akakiy Bashmatchkin endures the petty petty cruelties and jests of his coworkers. As a crime victim, he gets nowhere with the incompetent and abusive bureaucracy. As a member of the lower classes with an income to match his status, he must constantly struggle to eke out a meager existence. For example, while saving money for a new cloak,

Akakiy . . . . decided that it would be necessary to curtail his ordinary expenses, for the space of one year at least, to dispense with tea in the evening; to burn no candles, and, if there was anything which he must do, to go into his landlady's room, and work by her light. When he went into the street, he must walk as lightly as he could, and as cautiously, upon the stones, almost upon tiptoe, in order not to wear his heels down in too short a time; he must give the laundress as little to wash as possible; and, in order not to wear out his clothes, he must take

them off, as soon as he got home, and wear only his cotton dressing-gown, which had been long and carefully saved.

Many workers in czarist Russia were serfs, laborers bound to the farmland which they worked. Without permission of the landowner, they could not leave the land or get married. They were virtual slaves. In "The Cloak," Petrovitch somehow earned his way out of servitude to become a tailor. Still, he must work hard to make his way in the world. His heavy drinking and that of his family members before him suggests that alcohol has become an escape from the rigors of everyday life in an unfair government and social system. In 1861, Czar Alexander II issued an edict abolishing serfdom.

Bureaucratic Incompetence

In the first half of the 19th Century, the Russian government was unwieldy and ineffective, in part because it was top heavy with unqualified or ill-trained officials who had attained power on seniority rather than talent. Their incompetence resulted in a fear of making decisions. Consequently, these inept bureaucrats frequently passed the buck or postponed decisions indefinitely, as in "The Cloak." Akakiy is as much a victim of bureaucratic inaction, which robs him of justice, as he is of theft.

Unappreciated and Unrewarded Underclass

Life was hard for the common man in 19th Century Russia. Pay for lower-class workers was meager, in part because of economic problems and in part because of a government tax policy that favored the nobility. In addition, the best jobs frequently went to persons with the best pedigrees. Lower-class citizens, regardless of their abilities, often had to settle for menial labor. Their contributions to society typically went unnoticed. Akakiy, though a devoted and highly efficient copyist, is regarded as a nobody, as the narrator of "The Cloak" points out after Akakiy dies:

And St. Petersburg was left without Akakiy Akakievitch, as though he had never lived there. A being disappeared who was protected by none, dear to none, interesting to none, and who never even attracted to himself the attention of those students of human nature who omit no opportunity of thrusting a pin through a common fly, and examining it under the microscope.

Retribution

After he returns from the dead, Akakiy gains vengeance by terrorizing St. Petersburg and stealing the cloaks of pedestrians. Government workers appear to be his favorite targets. The narrator says, "Constant complaints poured in from all quarters that the backs and shoulders, not only of titular but even of court councillors, were exposed to the danger of a cold on account of the frequent dragging off of their cloaks."

Climax

The climax occurs when bearded men accost Akakiy Bashmatchkin and steal his new cloak.

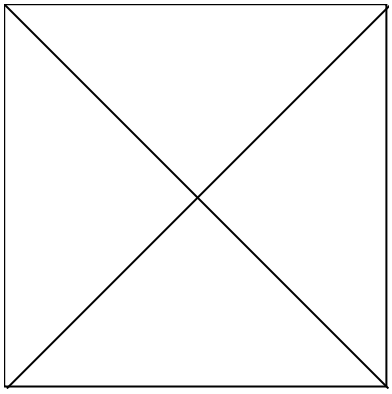
Cloak as a Symbol

Akakiy's old cloak appears to represent a Russia whose humanity has worn thin. This Russia exposes citizens born without rank or privilege to poverty, hunger, cold, and indignity. The new cloak appears to represent warmth, acceptance, prosperity. When thieves rob Akakiy of his cloak, they rob him of all that matters in his life. And he dies.

Roving Corpse: Divine Justice

When Akakiy returns from the dead, he appears to symbolize divine retribution or moral indignation. Like the Furies of ancient Greek mythology, he bedevils evildoers–in this case, the bureaucrats and aristocrats who prey on the weak. And he brings an implied warning from the author: Unless Russia changes, Akakiy will be millions, and he will bring down society itself. There's one thing that Gogol is known for, it's comedy (even though most of the time that comedy turns into horror by the end of the story, like with Akaky's ghost, but it still counts). Gogol's comedy often stems from his satirization of Russian culture. This story is no different. From the very first line of the overcoat, Gogol lets us know how he feels about Russian bureaucracy:

They say that, quite recently, a complaint was received from a justice of the peace, in which he plainly demonstrated that all the imperial institutions were going to the dogs, and that his sacred name was being taken in vain; and in proof he appended to the complaint a huge volume of some romantic composition, in which the justice of the peace appears about once in every ten lines, sometimes in a drunken condition. (1)



The point of a satire is to highlight the excesses, ills, and general ridiculousness of a culture. Today we might satirize people's tendencies to obsess over their smartphones or social media accounts, but in Gogol's day people were really caught up with the social hierarchy in bureaucratic departments. If you ask us, we'd choose Facebook over that any day.

Gogol's dry humor is peppered throughout "The Overcoat," like at Akaky's baptism, where "[...]they christened the child, whereat he wept, and made a grimace, as though he foresaw that he was to be a titular councilor" (5). It's moments like this that make us laugh in the midst of the otherwise rather bleak story.

Let's talk about Naturalism. It's a literary genre that grew out of realism, which was seriously obsessed with depicting everyday situations as they really were, right down to the nitty-gritty details. The difference? Naturalists felt that their characters were heavily influenced by outside forces like social conditions, environment, and genetics. Naturalist stories also tend to be pessimistic and have "objective" narrators.

You're probably pretty familiar with this style of writing, so it's nothing new to you. But think about this: in Gogol's time the majority of Russian literature was poetry and the prose, far from the realistic, dare we say…conversational…tone Gogol is known for. Gogol seemed positively avant-garde with his (mostly) pessimistic story about a boring little clerk overwhelmed by society's rules. His influence on the authors after him is so strong that he's probably the reason Russian literature is known for being so pessimistic. Everyone from Dostoyevsky to Tolstoy just hopped on Gogol's Naturalism train. These guys were definitely the original emo kids.

Last up, let's take a moment to examine "The Overcoat" as a parable. A parable is normally a short and simple story meant to deliver some kind of life lesson. They often focus on a

character facing some kind of moral dilemma, follows them through the decision that they make, and describes the consequences. Akaky is faced with a dilemma that doesn't seem moral at first glance, but gets pretty deep pretty fast once you look further into the meaning of the story. Akaky makes a decision, and that decision impacts everything else that happens in the story. At least half of "The Overcoat" is just describing the fallout from Akaky's decision to buy a new overcoat. The lesson here? Don't buy a new coat; or in other words, don't be envious of high social ranking. And get used to freezing your butt off in the cold Russian winter.

The Supernatural Element:

Ghosts are scary. Everyone knows that. But why are ghosts scary, especially ones with a relatively harmless appetite for coats? Even though Akaky the Ghost obviously isn't out to kill anybody, everyone freaks out about him anyway…but why? Seriously, how terrifying can a ghost be when all it does is take your coat? The chilling part of Akaky's ghost isn't that he might take your coat, it's that he doesn't care about a person's rank; he treats them all equally. And in a society that is obsessed with the social hierarchy, the idea of an equal-opportunity haunting is a very frightening thing indeed.

Dissatisfaction:

We can't get no satisfaction. In most Western societies, dissatisfaction is a good thing. Except, rather than calling it dissatisfaction, we call it ambition. In "The Overcoat," however, ambition isn't all it's cracked up to be. All around Akaky, other officials jostle with one another for higher ranks. He's the only one who is fine with his low status, but everyone looks down on him because of it. It's not until later that we realize he's the only person who's actually happy in the story, but that all changes when he becomes like everyone else. So in the world of "The Overcoat," there are two choices: be happy, poor, and disrespected, or be unhappy, rich, and powerful.

Isolation:

It's no fun to be alone and have no friends. Or at least that's what most of us think. Akaky, on the other hand, would probably think otherwise. When he's alone, he's perfectly content and his life has no problems. It's only when he starts becoming popular because of his new overcoat that everything changes. Even though he has new friends, they aren't very genuine

because they are only interested in his stuff. In "The Overcoat," Gogol reminds us that sometimes it's better to be alone than to have fake friends.

Style

In a simple, straightforward style, the author presents the story of a common man enduring the oppression and ridicule of an unfeeling society and its bureaucracy during the autocratic reign of Czar Nicholas I. In drawing his portrait of the simple, hard-working Akakiy Bashmatchkin, Gogol highlights seemingly insignificant details and incidents to symbolize or call attention to the abuse suffered by an ordinary man:

[Akakiy] had a peculiar knack, as he walked along the street, of arriving beneath a window just as all sorts of rubbish were being flung out of it: hence he always bore about on his hat scraps of melon rinds and other such articles.

Gogol never resorts to preachment or sentimentality when discussing the plight of his hapless protagonist. Instead, he uses humor, which is sometimes wonderfully bizarre. For example, after Akakiy rises from the dead to search for his stolen cloak, Gogol writes,
Arrangements were made by the police to catch the corpse, alive or dead, at any cost, and punish him as an example to others in the most severe manner. In this they nearly succeeded; for a watchman, on guard in Kirushkin Alley, caught the corpse by the collar on the very scene of his evil deeds, when attempting to pull off the frieze coat of a retired musician. Having seized him by the collar, he summoned, with a shout, two of his comrades, whom he enjoined to hold him fast while he himself felt for a moment in his boot, in order to draw out his snuff-box and refresh his frozen nose. But the snuff was of a sort which even a corpse could not endure. The watchman having closed his right nostril with his finger, had no sooner succeeded in holding half a handful up to the left than the corpse sneezed so violently that he completely filled the eyes of all three. While they raised their hands to wipe them, the dead man vanished completely, so that they positively did not know whether they had actually had him in their grip at all.

Questions for practice:

1. Is there anyone like Akakiy in your school or work group? If so, how do people treat him or her?
2. What was life like for lower-class Russians in the first half of the 19th Century?
3. In Gogol’s fantasy world, does Akakiy really rise from the dead? Or is the notorious cloak

robber one of the bearded men who stole ....Akakiy's cloak?

4. Akakiy is a copyist–that is, one who hand-copies documents. In the 19th Century, copyists were fixtures in offices throughout the ....world. What invention, or inventions, rendered them obsolete?

5. Petrovitch was a serf before he became a tailor. What was a serf?

6. What is quinsy, the illness Akakiy develops while walking through the cold, blustery streets of St. Petersburg? Is quinsy commonplace ....today?

7. Write an essay comparing and contrasting the bureaucrats of today–in the United States, England, and other countries–with the ....bureaucrats of czarist Russia.

The Trial

1 Introduction

2 About The Author

3 Summary of the Text

4 Analysis of the Novel

5 Characters of the novel

6 Theme of the Novel

7 Important Questions and Answers

1 Introduction:

A major problem confronting readers of Kafka's short stories is to find a way through the increasingly dense thicket of interpretations. Among the many approaches one encounters is that of the autobiographical approach. This interpretation claims that Kafka's works are little more than reflections of his lifelong tension between bachelorhood and marriage or, on another level, between his skepticism and his religious nature. While it is probably true that few writers have ever been moved to exclaim, "My writing was about you [his father]. In it, I merely poured out the sorrow I could not sigh out at your breast" [*Letter to His Father*], it is nevertheless dangerous to regard the anxieties permeating his work solely in these terms. Kafka's disenchantment with and eventual hatred of his father were a stimulus to write, but they neither explain the fascination of his writing nor tell us why he wrote at all.

The psychological or psychoanalytical approach to Kafka largely ignores the content of his works and uses the "findings" of the diagnosis as the master key to puzzling out Kafka's world. We know Kafka was familiar with the teachings of Sigmund Freud (he says so explicitly in his diary, after he finished writing "The Judgment" in 1912) and that he tried to express his problems through symbols in the Freudian sense. One may therefore read Kafka with Freud's teachings in mind. As soon as this becomes more than one among many aids to understanding, however, one is likely to read not Kafka, but a text on applied psychoanalysis or Freudian symbology. Freud himself often pointed out that the analysis of artistic values is not within the scope of the analytical methods he taught.

There is the sociological interpretation, according to which Kafka's work is but a mirror of the historical-sociological situation in which he lived. For the critic arguing this way, the question is not what Kafka really says but the reasons why he supposedly said it. What the sociological and the psychological interpretations have in common is the false assumption that the discovery of the social or psychological sources of the artist's experience invalidate the meaning expressed by his art.

Within the sociological type of interpretation, one of the most popular methods of criticism judges Kafka's art by whether or not it has contributed anything toward the progress of society. Following the Marxist-Leninist dictum that art must function as a tool toward the realization of the classless society, this kind of interpretation is prevalent not merely in Communist countries, but also among the New Left critics this side of the Iron and Bamboo Curtains. Marxist criticism of Kafka has shifted back and forth between outright condemnation of Kafka's failing to draw the consequences of his own victimization by the bourgeoisie and between acclamations stressing the pro-proletarian fighting quality of his heroes. That Kafka was the propagator of the working class as *the* revolutionary class has been maintained not only by official Communist criticism, but also by Western "progressives." And it is true that Kafka did compose a pamphlet lamenting the plight of workers. Yet in a conversation with his friend Janouch, he spoke highly of the Russian Revolution, and he expressed his fear that its religious overtones might lead to a type of modern crusade with a terrifying toll of lives. Surely a writer of Kafka's caliber can describe the terror of a slowly emerging totalitarian regime (Nazi Germany) without being a precursor of communism, as Communist criticism as often claimed. One can also read *The Trial* as the story of K.'s victimization by the Nazis (three of Kafka's sisters died in a concentration camp); it is indeed one of the greatest tributes one can pay to Kafka today that he succeeded in painting the then still latent horror of Nazism so convincingly. But one must not neglect or ignore the fact that Kafka was, above all, a poet; and to be a poet means to give artistic expression to the many levels and nuances of our kaleidoscopic human condition. To see Kafka as a social or political revolutionary because his country doctor, for instance, or the land surveyor of *The Castle* seeks to change his fate through voluntary involvement rather than outside pressure is tantamount to distorting Kafka's universal quality in order to fit him into an ideological framework.

Closely connected with the quasi-religious quality of Marxist interpretations of Kafka's stories are the countless philosophical and religious attempts at deciphering the make-up of his world. They range from sophisticated theological argumentation all the way to pure speculation. Although Kafka's religious nature is a subject complex and controversial enough to warrant separate mention, the critics arguing along these lines are also incapable, as are their sociological and psychological colleagues, of considering Kafka simply as an artist. What they all have in common is the belief that Kafka's "real meaning" lies beyond his parables and symbols, and can therefore be better expressed in ways he himself avoided for one reason or another. The presumptuousness of this particular approach lies in the belief that the artist depends on the philosopher for a translation of his ambiguous modes of expression into logical, abstract terms. All this is not to dispute Kafka's philosophical-religious cast of mind and his preoccupation with the ultimate questions of human existence. It is just that he lived, thought, and wrote in images and not in "coded" conceptual structures. Kafka himself thought of his stories merely as *points of crystallization* of his problems: Bendemann, Samsa, Gracchus, the hunger artist, the country doctor, Josef K., and K. of *The Castle* — all these men are close intellectual and artistic relatives of Kafka, yet it will not do to reduce his deliberately open-ended images to a collection of data.

Interpretations are always a touchy matter and, in Kafka's case, perhaps more so than in others. The reason for this is that his works are 1) essentially outcries against the inexplicable laws that govern our lives; 2) portrayals of the human drama running its course on several loosely interwoven levels, thus imparting a universal quality to his work; and 3) very much imbued with his high degree of sensitivity, which responded differently to similar situations at different times. Particularly this last aspect suggests incohesion and paradox to the mind which insists on prodding Kafka's stories to their oftentimes irrational core. Kafka's pictures stand, as Max Brod never tired of pointing out, not merely for themselves but also for something beyond themselves.

These difficulties have prompted many a scholar to claim that Kafka rarely thought of anything specific in his stories. From this view, it is but a short step to the relativistic attitude that every interpretation of Kafka is as good as every other one. To this, one may reply that "to think of nothing specific" is by no means the same thing as "to think of many things at the same time." Kafka's art is, most of all, capable of doing the latter to perfection. Paradoxical though it may seem at first, viewing Kafka's work from a number of vantage points is not an

invitation to total relativism, but a certain guarantee that one will be aware of the many levels of his work.

Despite the many differences in approaching Kafka's writings, all of them must finally deal with a rather hermetically sealed-off world. Whatever Kafka expresses is a reflection of his own complex self amidst a concrete social and political constellation, but it is a reflection broken and distorted by the sharp edges of his analytical mind. Thus the people whom his heroes meet and whom we see through their eyes are not "real" in a psychological sense, not "true" in an empirical sense, and not "natural" in a biological sense. Their one distinctive mark is that of being something *created.* Kafka once remarked to his friend Janouch, "I did not draw men. I told a story. These are pictures, only pictures." That he succeeded in endowing them with enough plausibility to raise them to the level of living symbols and parables is the secret of his art.

Kafka's stories should not tempt us to analyze them along the lines of fantasy versus reality. An unchangeable and alienated world unfolds before us, a world governed by its own laws and developing its own logic. This world is our world and yet it is not. Its pictures and symbols are taken from our world of phenomena, but they also appear to belong somewhere else. We sense that we encounter people we know and situations we have lived through in our own everyday lives, and yet these people and situations appear somehow estranged. They are real and physical, and yet they are also grotesque and abstract. They use a sober language devoid of luster in order to assure meaningful communication among each other, and yet they fail, passing one another like boats in an impenetrable fog. Yet even this fog, the realm of the surreal (super-real), has something convincing about it. We therefore have the exciting feeling that Kafka's people say things of preeminent significance but that it is, at the same time, impossible for us to comprehend.

Finally, the reader seems to be left with two choices of how to "read" Kafka. One is to see Kafka's world as full of parables and symbols, magnified and fantastically distorted (and therefore infinitely more real), a world confronting us with a dream vision of our own condition. The other choice is to forego any claim of even trying to understand his world and to expose oneself to its atmosphere of haunting anxiety, visionary bizarreness, and — occasionally — faint promises of hope.

Prague was steeped in the atmosphere of Jewish learning and writing until the social and political turmoil of the collapsing Austrian Empire put an end to its traditional character. The first Jews had come to Prague in the tenth century, and the earliest written document about what the city looked like was by a Jewish traveler. According to him, Prague was a cultural crossroads even then. Pulsating with life, the city produced many a lingering myth during the subsequent centuries, and they, in turn, added to its cultural fertility. The myth of the *golem* is probably its most well known: *golem* ("clay" in Hebrew) was the first chunk of inanimate matter that the famed Rabbi Loew, known for his learnedness as well as his alchemistic pursuits, supposedly awakened to actual life in the late sixteenth century. This myth fathered a whole genre of literature written in the haunting, semimystical atmosphere of Prague's Jewish ghetto. It is this background, medieval originally, but with several layers of subsequent cultural impulses superimposed on it, that pervades the world of Franz Kafka, supplying it with a very "real" setting of what is generally and misleadingly known as "Kafkaesque unrealness."

One of the unresolved tensions that is characteristic of Kafka's work occurs between his early (and growing) awareness of his Jewish heritage and the realization that modern Central European Jewry had become almost wholly assimilated. This tension remained alive in him quite apart from his situation as a prominent member of the Jewish-German intelligentsia of Prague. The problem concerned him all the more directly because his family clung to Jewish traditions only in a superficial way. Although perhaps of a more orthodox background than her husband — and therefore not quite so eager to attain total assimilation into gentile society — even Kafka's mother made no great effort to cherish Jewish ways. On one level, then, Kafka's animosity toward his father and his entire family may be explained by his mounting interest in his Jewish heritage which they did not share.

Kafka felt drawn to Jews who had maintained their cultural identity, among them the leader of a Yiddish acting group from Poland. He attended their performances in 1911, organized evenings of reading Yiddish literature, and was drawn into fierce arguments about this subject with his father, who despised traveling actors, as did the Jewish establishment of Prague. It was at that time that Kafka began to study Hebrew. As late as 1921, however, he still complained about having no firm knowledge of Jewish history and religion.

What fascinated Kafka about the various members of this group was their firmness of faith and their resistance to being absorbed into the culture of their gentile environment. There are

numerous letters and diary entries which point to Kafka's awareness of the essential difference between Western and Eastern Jews concerning this matter. Kafka felt a great affinity with the chassidic tradition *(chassidic* means "pious" in Hebrew; it was an old conservative movement within Judaism which came to flower again in the eighteenth century in eastern Europe). Kafka admired very much their ardent, this-worldly faith, their veneration of ancestry, and their cherishing of native customs. He developed a powerful contempt for Jewish artists who, in his estimation, too willingly succumbed to assimilation and secularization.

Kafka was particularly interested in Zionism, the movement founded by Theodor Herzl *(The Jewish State,* 1890) to terminate the dissemination of Jews all over the world by promoting their settlement in Palestine. Zionism preached the ancient Jewish belief that the Messiah would arrive with the re-establishment of the Jewish state, and Kafka's desire for such a Jewish state and his willingness to emigrate should be noted. Kafka published in a Zionist magazine, planned several trips to Palestine (which never materialized because of his deteriorating health), and was most enthusiastic about the solidarity, the sense of community, and the simplicity of the new *kibbuzim.*

While it is true that Kafka's friend Max Brod influenced him in supporting the ideals of Zionism, it is incorrect to say that without Brod's influence Kafka would never have developed an interest in the movement. His Hebrew teacher Thieberger, a friend and student of Martin Buber, was also a major influence on Kafka. Thieberger emphasized Jewish responsibility for the whole world and believed that everybody is witness to everybody else. Oddly enough, Kafka's father's steady exhortations to "lead an active life" may have added to his growing esteem for the Jewish pioneer ideal. Another source of Kafka's growing interest in Jewish tradition was, of course, his sickness, the very sickness that kept him from carrying out his plans to emigrate to Palestine and live there as a simple artisan. The more Kafka became aware of his approaching end, the more he delved into the study of his identity. A year before his death, he started attending the Berlin Academy of Jewish Studies, and it was during that same year, 1923, that he met Dora Dymant, who was of Chassidic background and further accented his search and love for his Jewish roots.

It is clear that Kafka's interest and love for the various aspects of Jewry are not merely an attempt on his part to make up for past omissions in this matter. They are, above all, the result

of his religious concerns — "religious" in the wider sense of the word — that is, religious by temperament, religious in the sense of ceaselessly searching and longing for grace.

To know Kafka is to grapple with this problem: was Kafka primarily a "religious" writer? The answer seems to depend on the views one brings to the reading of his stories rather than on even the best analyses. Because so much of Kafka's world remains ultimately inaccessible to us, any such labeling will reveal more about the reader than about Kafka or his works. He himself would most likely have refused to be forced into any such either/or proposition.

Perhaps one of the keys to this question is Kafka's confession that, to him, "writing is a form of prayer." Everything we know about him suggests that he probably could not have chosen any other form of expressing himself but writing. Considering the tremendous sacrifices he had made to his writing, it is only fair to say that he would have abandoned his art had he felt the need to get his ideas across in some philosophical or theological system. At the same time, one feels that what Kafka wanted to convey actually transcended literature and that, inside, art alone must have seemed shallow to him — or at least inadequate when measured against the gigantic task he set for himself — that is, inching his way toward at least approximations of the nature of truth. Each of Kafka's lines is charged with multiple meanings of allusions, daydreams, illusions, and reflections — all indicating a realm whose "realness" we are convinced of, but whose nature Kafka could not quite grasp with his art. He remained tragically aware of this discrepancy throughout his life.

This does not contradict the opinion that Kafka was a "philosopher groping for a form rather than a novelist groping for a theme." "Philosopher" refers here to a temperament, a cast of mind, rather than to a man's systematic, abstract school of thought. Whatever one may think of Kafka's success or failure in explaining his world, there is no doubt that he always deals with the profoundest themes of man's fate. The irrational and the horrible are never introduced for the sake of literary effect; on the contrary, they are introduced to express a depth of reality. And if there is one hallmark of Kafka's prose, it is the complete lack of any contrived language or artificial structure.

Essentially, Kafka desired to "extinguish his self" by writing, as he himself put it. In terms of craftsmanship, this means that much of his writing is too unorganized, open-ended, and obscure. Even allowing for the fact that he was concerned with a realm into which only symbols and parables can shed some light (rather than, say, metaphors and similes, which

would have tied his stories to the more concrete and definitive), it is doubtful whether Kafka can be called an "accomplished writer" in the sense that Thomas Mann, for instance, can.

Kafka was, then, a major writer, but not a good "craftsman." And he was a major thinker and seer in the sense that he registered, reflected, and even warned against the sickness of a whole age when contemporaries with a less acute consciousness still felt secure.

The question of Kafka's being a religious writer has been going on for decades, but has often been meaningless because of the failure of critics or readers to explain what they mean by "religious." It is essential to differentiate between those who call Kafka and Kafka's works religious in the wider sense of the term — that is, religious by temperament or mentality — and those who assert that his stories reflect Kafka as a believer in the traditional Judaic-Christian sense of the word. Of this latter group, his lifelong friend and editor Max Brod was the first and probably most influential. A considerable number of critics and readers have followed Brod's "religious" interpretations — particularly, Edwin Muir, Kafka's principal English translator. However, for some time now, Kafka criticism has not investigated the "religious" aspect. This is so partly because the psychoanalytical approach and the sociological approach have been more popular and fashionable (especially in the United States), and also because critics and biographers have proven beyond doubt that Brod committed certain errors while editing and commenting on Kafka. While the original attitude toward Brod was one of absolute reverence (after all, he saw Kafka daily for over twenty years, listened to his friend's stories, and advised him on changes), the consensus of opinion has more recently been that, although we owe him a great deal as far as Kafka and his work are concerned, he was a poor researcher. He was simply too self-conscious about his close friendship with Kafka and therefore too subjective: he would never admit the obviously neurotic streak in Kafka's personality. While we may trust Brod when he claims that Kafkas's aphorisms are much more optimistic and life-asserting than his fiction, it is difficult to consider Kafka primarily as a believer in the "in-destructible core of the universe" or more pronouncedly Jewish-Christian tenets. His famous remark, striking the characteristic tone of self-pity, "Sometimes I feel I understand the Fall of Man better than anyone," is more to the point. We have no reason to doubt Brod's judgment about Kafka's personally charming, calm, and even humorous ways. It is that in Kafka's fiction, calmness is too often overshadowed by fear and anxiety, and the rare touches of humor are little more than convulsions of what in

German is known as *Galgenhumor* ("gallows humor") — that is, the frantic giggle before one's execution.

In summary, one can argue in circles about Kafka's work being "religious," but one thing is clear: Kafka's stories inevitably concern the desperate attempts of people to do right. And as noted elsewhere, Kafka and his protagonists are identical to an amazing extent. This means that the main characters who try to do right but are continuously baffled, thwarted, and confused as to what it really means to do right are also Kafka himself. Viewed in this way, Kafka becomes a religious writer *par excellence:* he and his protagonists are classical examples of the man in whose value system the sense of duty and of responsibility and the inevitability of moral commandments have survived the particular and traditional code of a religious system — hence Kafka's yearning for a frame of reference which would impart meaning to his distinct sense of "shalt" and "shalt not." If one takes this all-permeating desire for salvation as the main criterion for Kafka's "religiousness" rather than the grace of faith which he never found, how could anyone *not* see Kafka as a major religious writer? "He was God-drunk," a critic wrote, "but in his intoxication his subtle and powerful intellect did not stop working."

Kafka's stories suggest meanings which are accessible only after several readings. If their endings, or lack of endings, seem to make sense at all, they will do so immediately and not in unequivocal language. The reason for this is that the stories offer a wide variety of possible meanings without confirming any particular one of them. This, in turn, is the result of Kafka's view which he shares with many twentieth-century writers — that his own self is a parcel of perennially interacting forces lacking a stable core; if he should attain an approximation of objectivity, this can come about only by describing the world in symbolic language and from a number of different vantage points. Thus a total view must inevitably remain inaccessible to him. Such a universe about which nothing can be said that cannot at the same time — and just as plausibly — be contradicted has a certain ironic quality about it — ironic in the sense that each possible viewpoint becomes relativized. Yet the overriding response one has is one of tragedy rather than irony as one watches Kafka's heroes trying to piece together the debris of their universe.

Kafka's world is essentially chaotic, and this is why it is impossible to derive a specific philosophical or religious code from it — even one acknowledging chaos and paradox as does much existential thought. Only the events themselves can reveal the basic absurdity of things. To reduce Kafka's symbols to their "real" meanings and to pigeonhole his world-view as some "ism" or other is to obscure his writing with just the kind of meaningless experience from which he liberated himself through his art.

Expressionism is one of the literary movements frequently mentioned in connection with Kafka, possibly because its vogue in literature coincided with Kafka's mature writing, between 1912 and his death in 1924. Of course, Kafka does have certain characteristics in common with expressionists, such as his criticism of the blindly scientific-technological world-view, for instance. However, if we consider what he thought of some of the leading expressionists of his day, he certainly cannot be associated with the movement: he repeatedly confessed that the works of the expressionists made him sad; of a series of illustrations by Kokoschka, one of the most distinguished representatives of the movement, Kafka said: "I don't understand. To me, it merely proves the painter's inner chaos." What he rejected in expressionism is the overstatement of feeling and the seeming lack of craftsmanship. While Kafka was perhaps not the great craftsman in the sense that Flaubert was, he admired this faculty in others. In terms of content, Kafka was highly skeptical and even inimical toward the expressionist demand for the "new man." This moralistic-didactic sledgehammer method repulsed him.

Kafka's relationship with existentialism is much more complex, mainly because the label "existentialist" by itself is rather meaningless. Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard all have a certain existentialist dimension in their writings, as do Camus, Sartre, Jaspers and Heidegger, with whose works the term existentialism has been more or less equated since World War II. These various people have rather little in common concerning their religious, philosophical, or political views, but they nevertheless share certain characteristic tenets present in Kafka.

Kafka certainly remained fascinated and overwhelmed by the major theme of all varieties of existentialist thinking, namely the difficulty of responsible commitment in the face of an absurd universe. Deprived of all metaphysical guidelines, man is nevertheless obligated to act morally in a world where death renders everything meaningless. He alone must determine what constitutes a moral action although he can never foresee the consequences of his

actions. As a result, he comes to regard his total freedom of choice as a curse. The guilt of existentialist heroes, as of Kafka's, lies in their failure to choose and to commit themselves in the face of too many possibilities — none of which appears more legitimate or worthwhile than any other one. Like Camus' Sisyphus, who is doomed to hauling a rock uphill only to watch it roll down the other side, they find themselves faced with the fate of trying to wring a measure of dignity for themselves in an absurd world. Unlike Sisyphus, however, Kafka's heroes remain drifters in the unlikely landscape they have helped create. Ulrich in Musil's *The Man Without Quality* and Mersault in Camus' *The Stranger* — these men are really contemporaries of Kafka's "heroes," drifters in a world devoid of metaphysical anchoring and suffering from the demons of absurdity and alienation. And in this sense, they are all modern-day relatives of that great hesitator Hamlet, the victim of his exaggerated consciousness and overly rigorous conscience.

The absurdity which Kafka portrays in his nightmarish stories was, to him, the quintessence of the whole human condition. The utter incompatibility of the "divine law" and the human law, and Kafka's inability to solve the discrepancy are the roots of the sense of estrangement from which his protagonists suffer. No matter how hard Kafka's heroes strive to come to terms with the universe, they are hopelessly caught, not only in a mechanism of their own contriving, but also in a network of accidents and incidents, the least of which may lead to the gravest consequences. Absurdity results in estrangement, and to the extent that Kafka deals with this basic calamity, he deals with an eminently existentialist theme.

Kafka's protagonists are lonely because they are caught midway between a notion of good and evil, whose scope they cannot determine and whose contradiction they cannot resolve. Deprived of any common reference and impaled upon their own limited vision of "the law," they cease to be heard, much less understood, by the world around them. They are isolated to the point where meaningful communication fails them. When the typical Kafka hero, confronted with a question as to his identity, cannot give a clear-cut answer, Kafka does more than indicate difficulties of verbal expression: he says that his hero stands between two worlds — between a vanished one to which he once belonged and a present world to which he does not belong. This is consistent with Kafka's world, which consists not of clearly delineated opposites, but of an endless series of possibilities. These are never more than temporary expressions, never quite conveying what they really ought to convey — hence the temporary, fragmentary quality of Kafka's stories. In the sense that Kafka is aware of the

limitations which language imposes upon him and tests the limits of literature, he is a "modern" writer. In the sense that he does not destroy the grammatical, syntactical, and semantic components of his texts, he remains traditional. Kafka has refrained from such destructive aspirations because he is interested in tracing the human reasoning process in great detail up to the point where it fails. He remains indebted to the empirical approach and is at his best when he depicts his protagonists desperately trying to comprehend the world by following the "normal" way.

Because they cannot make themselves heard, much less understood, Kafka's protagonists are involved in adventures which no one else knows about. The reader tends to have the feeling that he is privy to the protagonist's fate and, therefore, finds it rather easy to identify with him. Since there is usually nobody else within the story to whom the protagonist can communicate his fate, he tends to reflect on his own problems over and over again. This solipsistic quality Kafka shares with many an existential writer, although existentialist terminology has come to refer to it as "self-realization."

Kafka was thoroughly familiar with the writings of Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky, and it pays to ponder the similarities and differences between their respective views. The most obvious similarity between Kafka and Kierkegaard, their complex relationships with their respective fiancées and their failures to marry, also points up an essential difference between them. When Kafka talks of bachelorhood and a hermit's existence, he sees these as negative. Kierkegaard, on the other hand, was an enthusiastic bachelor who saw a divine commandment in his renunciation of women. For Kafka, bachelorhood was a symbol of alienation from communal happiness, and he thought of all individualism in this manner. This makes him a poor existentialist.

Unlike Kierkegaard, who mastered his anguish through a deliberate "leap into faith," leaving behind all intellectual speculation, Kafka and his heroes never succeed in conquering this basic anguish: Kafka remained bound by his powerful, probing intellect, trying to solve things rationally and empirically. Kafka does not conceive of the transcendental universe he seeks to describe in its paradoxical and noncommunicable terms; instead, he sets to describing it rationally and, therefore, inadequately. It is as if he were forced to explain something which he himself does not understand — nor is really supposed to understand. Kafka was not the type who could *will* the act of belief. Nor was he a man of flesh and bones who could venture the decisive step toward action and the "totality of experience," as did

Camus, for instance, who fought in the French Underground against the Nazi terror. Kafka never really went beyond accepting this world in a way that remains outside of any specific religion. He tended to oppose Kierkegaard's transcendental mysticism, although it might be too harsh to argue that he gave up all faith in the "indestructible nature" of the universe, as he called it. Perhaps this is what Kafka means when he says, "One cannot say that we are lacking faith. The simple fact in itself that we live is inexhaustible in its value of faith."

In the case of Dostoevsky, the parallels with Kafka include merciless consciousness and the rigorous conscience issuing from it. Just as characters in Dostoevsky's works live in rooms anonymous and unadorned, for example, so the walls of the hunger artist's cage, the animal's maze, and Gregor Samsa's bedroom are nothing but the narrow, inexorable, and perpetual prison walls of their respective consciences. The most tragic awakening in Kafka's stories is always that of consciousness and con-science. Kafka surpasses Dostoevsky in this respect because that which is represented as dramatic relation — between, say, Raskolnikov and Porfiry in *Crime and Punishment* — becomes the desperate monologue of a soul in Kafka's pieces.

Kafka's philosophical basis, then, is an open system: it is one of human experiences about the world and not so much the particular *Weltanschauung* of a thinker. Kafka's protagonists confront a secularized deity whose only visible aspects are mysterious and anonymous. Yet despite being continually faced with the essential absurdity of all their experiences, these men nevertheless do not cease trying to puzzle them out. To this end, Kafka uses his writing as a code of the transcendental, a language of the unknown. It is important to understand that this code is not an escape from reality, but the exact opposite — the instrument through which he seeks to comprehend the world in its totality — without ever being able to say to what extent he may have succeeded.

2 About The author:

Franz Kafka (1883-1924) was born in Prague to middle-class Jewish parents. His father, the son of a village butcher, was a man of little education but strong entrepreneurial ambition. He rose from a traveling peddler to a successful retailer and wholesaler, and married the daughter of a wealthy brewery owner (a marriage above his station, in the eyes of the time). Kafka was the firstborn, followed by two brothers who died in infancy, and then three surviving sisters.

Throughout his life, Kafka's memories of his childhood, and in particular of his childhood relationship to his upwardly-mobile, harsh father, remained bitter.

After an education in a typically draconian gymnasium for the time, Kafka entered law school and received a doctorate degree. While a law student, he associated with many members of Prague's burgeoning scene of young, German- speaking writers. One such companion, Max Brod, became a lifelong devoted friend and was ultimately responsible for preserving much of what exists of Kafka's writing. Because Franz Kafka has become the poster boy for twentieth-century alienation and disoriented anxiety, his work is often introduced in the context of Kafka's own experience of alienation. A Czech in the Austro-Hungarian empire, a German-speaker among Czechs, a Jew among German-speakers, a disbeliever among Jews; alienated from his pragmatic and overbearing father, from his bureaucratic job, from the opposite sex; caught between a desire to live in literature and to live a normal bourgeois life; acutely and lucidly self-critical; physically vulnerable--Kafka nowhere found a comfortable fit.

Kafka knew writing was his vocation, but did not feel he could make a living at it--nor did he particularly want to try. It was something purer and more desperately personal to him--a "form of prayer" and a temporary respite from his demons. He took a law clerkship after graduation, and then, briefly, a job with a private insurance company. In 1908, with the help of a friend's father, he obtained an entry-level position with the Workmen's Accident Insurance Institute for the Kingdom of Bohemia. There he served as a diligent and respected functionary until his premature retirement in 1922.

In 1924, at the age of 41, Kafka succumbed to tuberculosis. The bulk of his work was published after his early death, just as many of the nightmares he described in his work were taking shape in Europe's new totalitarian states. His novels *Amerika, The Trial* (written during 1914-1915, published 1925), and *The Castle* were left unfinished. Yet he did have admirers during his lifetime. The collections of short stories and the novellas he published sold minimally, but were highly praised within a small but respected circle of German-speaking intellectuals. The developments of the twisted century itself brought Kafka's works--prescient accounts of the banality of terror--to the world's attention, and lent the word "kafkaesque" to hundreds of languages. (Fulfilling his pessimism, Kafka's three sisters and the woman who was likely the one true love of his life all perished in concentration camps.) Beyond this terrible prophesy, however, it is Kafka's description of the struggle to find

meaning in a cosmos he knew to be meaningless that makes his work the gateway to modern literature.

3 Summary:

An ambitious, worldly young bank official named Joseph K. is arrested by two warders "one fine morning," although he has done nothing wrong. K. is indignant and outraged. The morning happens to be that of his thirtieth birthday. One year later, on the morning of his thirty-first birthday, two warders again come for K. They take him to a quarry outside of town and kill him in the name of the Law. K. lets them.

The Trial is the chronicle of that intervening year of K.'s case, his struggles and encounters with the invisible Law and the untouchable Court. It is an account, ultimately, of state-induced self-destruction. Yet, as in all of Kafka's best writing, the "meaning" is far from clear. Just as the parable related by the chaplain in Chapter Nine (called "The Doorkeeper" or "Before the Law") elicits endless commentary from students of the Law, so has *The Trial* been a touchstone of twentieth-century critical interpretation. As some commentators have noted, it has, in parts, the quality of revealed truth; as such it is ultimately unresolvable--a mirror for any sectarian reading.

How to summarize this kind of text? It was written during 1914-1915, while Kafka was an official in the Workmen's Accident Insurance Institute for the Kingdom of Bohemia. On one level we can see in *The Trial* a satirical pillorying of the Austro-Hungarian bureaucracy of Kafka's day. Yet to many readers it is eerily prescient of the psychological weaponry used by the much more insidious totalitarian regimes to come, of the legally-sanctioned death machines Kafka never lived to see. It is also an unfinished novel, and this is apparent in the final chapters. It is at times as suffocating to read as the airless rooms of the Court that it describes. The German title, *Der Prozess,* connotes both a "trial" and a "process," and it is perhaps this maddening feeling of inevitability that leaves a lasting visceral impression: the machinery has been set in motion, and the process will grind toward conclusion despite our most desperate exhortations.

4 Analysis of the text:

Chapter 1:

When his landlady's cook does not bring his breakfast at the expected hour, Joseph K. rings for her. A man whom he has never seen before knocks and steps into his bedroom. Another waits in the next room. The men inform him that he has been arrested, and request that he return to his room. They can offer no explanations--they are mere underlings, his warders. K. does not know whether this is some sort of joke or not. It is his thirtieth birthday, and perhaps his colleagues at the Bank are playing a prank. But he doesn't want to be too rash or show his hand, especially with these fools to whom he feels superior.

He returns to his room and stews. Through the windows of the apartment across the way an old man and woman have been following the proceedings. With a startling shout, one of the warders summons K. to see the Inspector. The warders make him change into a black suit and walk him into an adjoining room. The room has recently been rented to Fraulein Burstner, a typist. Now it has been temporarily taken over by an Inspector and three young men. The Inspector can tell K. no more than that he has been arrested, and that his protestations of innocence are unbecoming. K. is infuriated, but unable to extract any useful explanation. The Inspector says that K. is free to go about his business for the time being, then departs.

K. goes to the bank, but foregoes his usual evening stroll, appearance at the beer hall, and weekly visit to Elsa, the cabaret waitress. He feels that the morning's events have caused an upheaval in the household of Frau Grubach, and wants to set things to right. Frau Grubach is darning socks in her room when K. returns. K. knocks, enters, and has a chat with her. She was not troubled by the presence of the warders or the inspectors. K. is her most valued lodger, and she will find no complaint with him. He asks if Fraulein Burstner has returned. Frau Grubach says no, the young woman is out at the theater, from which she always returns quite late.

K. waits for Fraulein Burstner to return. When she does, he goes with her to her room and apologizes for its being used by strangers on his account. He explains to her what happened, and in his re-enactment of the morning, gives a shout that rouses Frau Grubach's nephew sleeping in an adjoining room. Fraulein Burstner is startled. K. rushes to her to comfort her, and ends up covering her in kisses. He returns to his room in good spirits, though he's concerned that the captain might make trouble for Fraulein Burstner with the landlady (she is concerned about running a respectable establishment).

Commentary

Joseph K. is ambitious, successful, demanding, curt--a man of business and no nonsense. He is arrogant, calculating, intolerant of his perceived inferiors, and yet (at least in the larger question of guilt, innocence, and civil liberty) wholly in the right. A typical Kafka protagonist, he achieves the difficult and separate balances of complexity and unreality, sympathy and aversion. But what is he guilty of? What would warrant his arrest and prosecution (not to mention persecution)? Ostensibly nothing. As the novel bears out, the Court that has claimed him is thoroughly vile. Yet no one is free of guilt. Tempted as he is to laugh the whole thing off, to call the warders' bluff and declare the whole event a practical joke, he cannot. In part this is because he calculates it to be unwise to show his hand, or to force that of his opponents', but also because there is a lingering question in his mind of whether somehow, in some way, he has been remiss. Is it his inherent apolitical nature? He has always taken law, order, and justice for granted. They have been a steady and invisible framework within which he has achieved his success, without ever having pause to consider them. He is not a man who contemplates the larger questions. Is this inability to "think outside the box," his susceptibility to the machinations of the machine into whose path he has been thrown, the basis of his eventual, inevitable guilt?

K.'s experience with the warders and the Inspector sets the tone for his various encounters with representatives of the Law. Most are friendly enough with him, if not always decorous. Almost all of them strike him with their small-mindedness. They are functionaries, robots, far down on the totem, following orders and fulfilling duty without understanding or attempting to understand underlying motive. The Court is unimpeachable; the Law is its own justification and the only one these underlings need.

Chapter 2:

A phone call informs Joseph K. that a brief inquiry into his case is to take place the following Sunday. He is given the address where he is to go, but not the time. When the Assistant Manager of the bank, with whom he has not gotten on well, makes the overture of inviting him to join him Sunday on his yacht, K. must refuse the invitation.

Resolving to arrive at the appointed destination at nine a.m.--presumably a logical starting time for court business--K. sets out Sunday morning on foot. He does not want to involve anyone in his case, not even a taxi driver. And he does not want to lower himself before this Court of Inquiry by being too obsessively punctual. The street runs through a poor

neighborhood of tenements, which on this weekend morning is alive with inhabitants, their calls, shouts, and laughter. When he reaches the building, K. is annoyed to find that it is a large one with several separate stairwells, multiple floors, and no indication of which might be the correct apartment. He chooses a stairway and ascends, maneuvering around children and pausing for their marble games. In order to gain a peek at each room, which he hopes will indicate to him where the inquiry is to take place, K. invents the ploy that he is looking for a joiner named Lanz. Door after door, floor after floor, he finds poor families who do not know Lanz but recommend other joiners or men with names similar to "Lanz." Finally, on the fifth floor, when he is exasperated to the point of giving up, a woman washing children's clothes in a basin opens the door and tells him to enter and go through to another door.

K. enters the second room--a meeting hall with a gallery, all quite packed with people. He is led by a small boy through the throng up to a crowded platform at the other end of the hall. There, a man whom he takes to be the Examining Magistrate rebukes him for being over an hour late (it is now past ten a.m.). K. gives a cool reply that he is here now, and at this half of the crowd bursts into applause. Emboldened by this, but concerned that the other half of the crowd remains stonily silent, he sets out to win over the entire audience. The Magistrate asks him if he is a house painter, to which he replies that he is the chief clerk of a large bank. K. then proceeds to dominate the meeting. He impugns the secret policy that is evidently at work here. He seizes the Magistrate's notebook and holds it up with disdain before dropping it onto the Magistrate's table. He gives a long speech describing his arrest. He sees the Magistrate apparently giving some sign to someone in the audience, and calls him to task for it. There are rumblings in the audience, then silence. Old men's eyes fix intently on him as their owners stroke their white beards. Just as he finishes condemning the entire system that has brought him here, he is interrupted by a scream from the back of the hall. The woman whom he met at the door and a man are in the corner causing some sort of commotion. The stark division that had previously existed between the two factions in the room disappears. The people move together. K. has the urge to move toward the disturbance, but hands restrain him. He leaps from the platform down into the crowd and at last perceives that all are wearing identical badges. So, these are all the corrupt officials of whom he has been speaking! They have egged him on, he declares, by pretending to be factious, when in fact they were merely amusing themselves with the declarations of an innocent man. He heads for the door, but before he can exit, the Magistrate waylays him with these words: "I merely wanted to point out that today. . . you have flung away with your own hand all the advantages

which an interrogation invariably confers on an innocent man." K. claims all those who were in the audience to be "scoundrels" and heads out. The chamber comes to life behind him as the badged men begin to analyze the case.

Commentary

The interrogation scene is distinctly surreal, unfolding in a dreamlike fashion. The location itself is unreal: the top floor of a tenement, in a poor family's back room. Add to this the murmuring masses, the applause, uproar, and stony silences, the beards and badges, the secret signs, groping hands, and most glaringly K.'s own intemperate and ill-advised outburst. Are they goading him? Is his aggression a useful tactic? Does his conduct even matter? This is an alternate world of anonymous tribunals where K. does not know the rules of engagement. His initiation does not bode well. Yet he still feels it is best not to take the case too seriously.

Throughout the book, the Court is associated with dankness, dust, staleness, suffocation; K. repeatedly suffers from the lack of fresh air. Here we have the first hints of it. In the streets, in the hallways and stairwells of this poor neighborhood there is life and vitality. K. manages just fine. The moment he steps into the Court meeting hall, K. feels the air "too thick for him" and steps out again. Later K. tries to make out faces in the gallery through the "dimness, dust, and reek." If K. is not physically sickened by the atmosphere (as he will be in succeeding chapters), his judgment and faculties do seem addled, which perhaps explains the dream quality of the scene.

Chapter 3:

K. awaits a second summons but does not hear from the mysterious Court. He returns to the address on Sunday morning. The same young woman opens the door, but informs him that there is no sitting today. Indeed, the meeting hall/courtroom is empty save for a few curious books left on the table.

K. learns that the young woman (who cleans) and her husband (an usher for the court) live in the room without charge in exchange for their labor. The woman explains that the disturbance last week was caused by a certain law student who is always after her. But she entered the courtroom in the first place because she took an interest in K. She is clearly attracted to him, and offers to help him. He is doubtful that she can, and does not want her to jeopardize her

job merely to influence a sentencing that he ultimately intends to laugh off. But, she offers, perhaps she can sway the Examining Magistrate in some way, since that man has recently begun to notice her.

Just then the bandy-legged, scraggly-bearded law student enters the courtroom and motions for the woman. She excuses herself to K., says she must go to him briefly, but will return soon, and then K. can have his way with her. As the woman and the student speak in hushed tones at the window, K. reflects that he would very much like to possess her--both for the obvious reason and for the measure of revenge it would extract from the Magistrate.

K. grows impatient as the conversation wears on and the student kisses the woman. He and the student exchange words. The student lifts up the woman and begins to carry her off. K. offers to free her--which he could easily do, as the scrawny student is no match for him--but she declines. She says the Magistrate has sent for her--she is obviously not in much distress. The student labors at carrying her up a narrow flight of stairs that would seem to lead to a garret. K. watches furiously. He has been defeated, but only because he entered into a fight. The key, he realizes, is to go about his own affairs and so to remain above all this.

This resolution does not last long. The woman's husband, the usher, returns. This man complains to K. about his wife and the law student. The usher cannot throttle the student as he would like to, for fear of losing his job. But perhaps a man like K. could do him the favor. K. points out that the student might be in a position to influence the outcome of his case. Usually, says the usher, the cases are foregone conclusions.

The usher is heading upstairs, to the Law Offices, and he invites K. to accompany him. K. hesitates, but, curious to see the workings of the Court, agrees to go. They climb the stairs and enter a long, narrow lobby where various accused men wait. K. tries to have a conversation with one of them but the man is confused, demoralized, and uncomfortable. K. grows impatient with this pitiable individual. As he and the usher walk on, K. suddenly begins to feel very tired. He asks the usher to lead him out, but the usher is reluctant to do so. K.'s raised voice attracts the attention of a woman in a nearby office, who asks his business. K. feels faint and is unable to respond. The woman offers him a chair and assures him that the stuffy air similarly affects many people on their first visit to the offices. K.'s swoon intensifies to a near-paralysis. The woman suggests to a smartly-dressed man who shares her office--and who turns out to be the Clerk of Inquiries--that they take K. to the sick room. K.

manages to request that they instead help him to the door. He is scarcely able to walk, even with the two officials half carrying him. He is ashamed as they pass before the accused man with whom he had been impatient before. That man meekly makes excuses for his presence to the Chief of Inquiries.

At last, K. is at the threshold of the offices. The air from outside revives him. He shakes hands with the man and woman who assisted him until he notices that the fresh air seems to have on them the debilitating effect that the office air had on him. Rejuvenated but bewildered by his body's betrayal, K. bounds down the stairs and resolves to find a better use for his Sunday mornings.

Commentary

In keeping with the disjointedness of the narrative, the washer woman, apropos of nothing, throws herself at K. and then disappears from the novel. She apparently sets the behavior pattern for young, working-class women when in K.'s presence (Leni will act similarly, and the lawyer will later give an explanation of her actions). She also manages, indirectly, to induce K. to ascend to the Law Offices, and perhaps this is her purpose. K.'s calculations of sexual conquest--as a tool of power against the magistrate and thus the Court--lead to his first admitted defeat in this mental chess match in which he sees himself and the Court engaged. His second defeat must then be his debility in the Law Offices.

Stale, suffocating air is once more the hallmark of the Court and all its doings. While at the interrogation the atmosphere may have affected K.'s judgment, in the Offices it physically incapacitates him. He is rendered speechless and powerless, utterly at the mercy of the Court. How far does this association go? Is the Court like bad air in a closed room? The two seem ineffably linked; perhaps they are interchangeable. Like the air, the court seems to be everywhere, invisible, insidious, known by its effects.

There is a slight parallel between the final scene of this chapter and Chapter Ten that should be pointed out. In both cases, K. is lead away by Court functionaries who hold him by the arms. In this chapter, K. requests the escort and the support. In the last chapter, K. cannot escape it.

Chapter 4

Summary

K. spends several days unsuccessfully trying to speak with Fraulein Burstner. She manages to avoid meeting him, despite the considerable measures he takes to encounter her. He sends her a letter, offering to make amends for his behavior and to follow any dictates she might provide for further interaction between them. He will wait in his room on Sunday for some sign from her. His letter is not answered. On Sunday he notices that another boarder, Fraulein Montag, is moving into Fraulein Burstner's room.

His landlady, Frau Grubach, who has been tortured by his silence this past week, is relieved when K. finally speaks to her. Though K. is not particularly kind to her, it is at least a sort of forgiveness.

Fraulein Montag asks to speak with him. He goes and sees her in the dining room. She tells him that Fraulein Burstner thought it best for all parties that the interview he requested not take place. Fraulein Burstner had not intended to respond in any way, but Fraulein Montag prevailed upon Fraulein Burstner to allow her to act as intermediary and explicitly inform K. of Fraulein Burstner's opinion. K. thanks Fraulein Montag for the information and rises to leave. The Captain (Frau Grubach's nephew) enters and greets Fraulein Montag with a respectful hand-kissing. K. senses that the two of them are both exaggerating Fraulein Burstner's importance to him and trying to impede his conquest of the girl. He leaves the dining room but cannot resist knocking at Fraulein Burstner's door. There is no answer. He goes in, feeling that he is doing something pointless and wrong. Fraulein Burstner must have left while Fraulein Montag was talking to him. He leaves the room, but sees that Fraulein Montag and the Captain are conversing in the doorway of the dining room. They have clearly witnessed his indiscretion.

Commentary

The action and narrative direction of Chapter Four are never really taken up again in this unfinished novel. Fraulein Burstner reappears ephemerally in the final chapter, but the sub-plot of K.'s pursuit and her reluctance is never fleshed out. True, many characters in *The Trial* appear briefly and quickly disappear, like so many evaporating figures in a dreamed

landscape. But one feels more attention might ultimately have been paid her, especially considering the significant symbolic role she plays in K.'s final thoughts.

The Captain's and Fraulein Montag's suspicions do not seem related to K.'s case, nor does K. seem to link the two in any way to his legal difficulties. Neither of these characters has any bearing on the rest of the book.

Chapter 5:

Summary

A few days later, as K. is readying to leave the bank for the day, he hears "convulsive sighs" coming from behind the door of the lumber room. He opens the door and enters. The two warders who first appeared in his apartment are at the mercy of a man dressed in leather--the Whipper. The Whipper is preparing to do what Whippers do best. The men are being whipped because K. complained about their conduct at the first interrogation. K. is horrified. He explains that he had merely described the men's behavior, did not hold them responsible for their actions; he had no idea that they would be punished, and has absolutely no desire to see them punished. He offers to pay the Whipper not to whip the pitiful, supplicating men. But a Whipper must do what a Whipper must do. The whipping commences, and one of the warder's lets loose a blood-curdling shriek that sends K. out of the room and into the hall. He reassures the clerks who come to investigate the noise that it was merely a dog howling outside.

K. feels terrible about the warders. He would have been willing to increase the bribe, or to offer himself as their replacement--an option that the Whipper must surely have refused--if only one of the warders had not screamed, making it necessary for K. to leave the room and explain away the situation to the clerks. All the next day the warders weigh on K.'s mind. He stays late to catch up on work, but, when he walks past the lumber room he cannot help looking in. There are the warders and the Whipper, just as they were the previous evening. The warders begin again to call to him. K. slams the door shut, beats on it with his fist, and, near tears, rushes back to where the clerks are. He orders them to clear out the lumber room. They promise to do so the next day. He goes home with a blank mind.

Commentary

This incident seems orchestrated precisely to facilitate an eventual mental breakdown, the signs of which many of the accused men seem to exhibit. It is one thing to have one's own case to worry about, but it is another to be saddled with the guilt of being, however unintentionally, the source of these poor fools' misery. Those who look to *The Trial* as a harbinger of totalitarian atrocity note that this chapter evokes the interrogation-torture (and it is not always the interrogated who is tortured) and psychological oppression that have been the calling cards of a depressing number of twentieth-century regimes.

The Court apparently has access to every place--it can set up shop in a company's closet, or in a tenement attic--yet it still conducts its business in dark, sealed, uncomfortable, makeshift or out-of-the-way places (such as the examples just given). This is surely not coincidental; rather it is an essential characteristic of an impenetrable and unaccountable bureaucracy.

Chapter Five maintains the relationship between K., the Court, and air. After witnessing the whipping, and realizing he cannot prevent it, K. steps over to a window and opens it, as if the fresh air will dispel the presence of the Court.

Chapter 6:

Summary

Joseph K.'s impetuous country-dwelling Uncle Karl comes to see him. The uncle has caught wind of the case and is very concerned, both for K. and for the family's sake. K. is taking the whole thing far too lightly for his uncle's satisfaction--the case calls for energetic action. Uncle Karl prevails upon K. to accompany him on a visit to an old lawyer friend.

Herr Huld, the lawyer, is on his sick bed when they call. He becomes much more animated when K. is introduced. K.'s uncle verbally abuses the man's nurse until she leaves at the lawyer's behest. It turns out the lawyer already knows of K.'s case from his movements in court circles. In fact, the Chief Clerk of the Court is in the room, waiting in the shadows. He has come to pay the lawyer a visit; K. and Uncle Karl have not noticed him. The Chief Clerk joins the three and begins to speak eloquently while pointedly ignoring K. K. wonders whether this man might have been in the crowd during his interrogation.

A loud sound of breaking cookery comes from the entrance hall. K. volunteers to see what has happened. It is Leni, the lawyer's nurse. Apparently burning with desire for him, she

caused the commotion to bring him out of the room. She leads him into the lawyer's study. In the study K. notices a large portrait of a man in a judge's robe depicted is if ready to spring from his throne-like seat. He asks Leni about this man. She knows him--he is only an Examining Magistrate. She also knows about K.'s case, and implores him to be less unyielding. Foreplay ensues, etc. etc.

Leni gives K. a key and tells him he is welcome any time. He goes out into the street where his uncle lambastes him. According to Uncle Karl, K. has badly damaged his case by disappearing for hours. The Chief Clerk waited until K.'s absence became glaring and the conversation awkward, then left. Uncle Karl has been waiting for hours, by his own account.

Commentary

Leni is the third woman to want Joseph K. Who are the women of *The Trial*? Maids, secretaries, and poor housewives, all accustomed to playing, or eager to play, the role of mistress. Kafka's biographer describes pre-World War I Prague as a place where young professionals--a banker such K., a lawyer or bureaucrat such as Kafka--would marry women of their class but habitually go to poorer women of a lower social class for sex. Prostitution was, for some women, not so clearly defined as a profession--the lines between lover, mistress, free-lancer, and professional were not so strictly drawn. Certainly, this reflects the relative powerlessness--economically, socially, politically--of women low on the social scale. Young men did not complain, and perhaps the young women with whom they consorted got more out of the bargain than was otherwise available to them within the strictly prescribed boundaries of their social world. The mores of the time and place tacitly approved of the arrangement.

That said, Leni seems to adore K. beyond all reason or promise of potential benefit. K. himself has no idea why he has suddenly become so attractive, but he is conceited enough not to trouble himself too much about it. Still, for someone so ambitious and punctilious in his work, and so determined not to give the Court any hold over him, K. acts at times quite recklessly. The first instance was his insolence during the interrogation. And now, he snubs the Chief Clerk of the Court. Such, apparently, are the charms of Leni. Or such is K.'s underdeveloped sense of gravity at this point in his case.

Chapter 7:

oseph K. sits in his office on a wintry morning thinking about his case. He goes into a sixteen-page reverie in which he inwardly expresses his frustrations with his lawyer and recounts all the information his lawyer has conveyed to him about the tangled workings of the Court. K. has grown weary of his lawyer's endless talk and seemingly minimal action. The lawyer defends himself by saying that in these cases it is often better to do nothing overt, at least not at this stage. K. is intensely exhausted and recognizes in himself the symptoms of mental strain due to worrying about his case. He can no longer pretend to take the high road and ignore it.

K. is incapable of concentrating on his work. Several important people are kept waiting for excessive periods while he thinks about his case. At last he sees a client, an important manufacturer. K. again is unable to pay attention to the matter at hand. His chief rival, the Assistant Manager, comes in and takes over the case. K. returns to his thoughts. The manufacturer has a few words with K. on his way out. He has heard of K.'s case (it will soon be commonplace for K. to encounter people who know about his situation, but it is still a shock at this point) and has a friendly recommendation to make. The manufacturer knows a lowly painter, called Titorelli, who paints portraits for the Court. This painter informed him of K.'s case. He suggests that K. visit this man, find out what he knows, and see if he might be of any service.

K. takes the advice. After an uncomfortable encounter with the businessmen waiting in the lobby to meet with him (which is resolved--though to K.'s distinct disadvantage--by the appearance of unctuous Assistant Manager), K. goes to call on the painter. The painter lives in a section of the city even poorer than the one K. visited for his interrogation. K. finds the building, climbs stairs, runs a gauntlet of nosy teenage girls, and meets the painter in the latter's tiny studio room. The girls remain outside the door, peeping and listening.

The painter is indeed an official Court painter--a position he inherited from his father. He provides K. with more information about the Court. He offers to use his connections to aid K.'s cause. He describes the three possible acquittals that may be hoped for: definite acquittal, ostensible acquittal, and indefinite postponement. The first is the stuff of legends, and has never occurred in the painter's experience. The second is a non-binding acquittal granted by the lower judges, which may be revoked at any time should another judge or a higher level of the Court demand action. This acquittal requires a fatiguing flurry of petitioning and lobbying, but little effort thereafter--that is until the case is revisited, at which point the

efforts must begin anew. Thus the possibility of the case's resumption--of arrest at any moment and a return to square one--hovers perpetually over the accused. Indefinite postponement requires constant attention and contact with the Court but keeps the case in its initial stages. It avoids the perpetual anxiety of possible arrest, but requires constant activity. The advantage to be gained from both ostensible acquittal and indefinite postponement is that they prevent the case from coming to sentencing.

While the painter talks, K. finds the stuffy room more and more unbearable. He is hot and barely able to breathe. At last he takes his leave, without instructing the painter which of the options he prefers. Before allowing him to leave, the painter induces the desperate K. to buy several identical landscapes. As the nosy girls are still outside the door, the painter lets K. out through another door in the tiny room. This leads to a hallway that looks identical to the lobby of the law offices K. visited in Chapter Three. The air is even worse in this hallway. K. is taken aback. The painter informs K. that there are Law Court Offices in nearly every attic. K. holds his handkerchief over his face as an usher escorts him out.

Commentary

Chapter Seven dumps on K. (and the reader) a windfall of information, all of which comes to nothing. Or, rather, all of which leads to a few simple conclusions: the Court is inscrutable and irredeemably corrupt. Both the lawyer and the painter would have K. believe that the only thing that really matters is good relations with subordinate officials. Yet this is the case only because no one knows who the higher officials are. They are unreachable, so naturally all wheedling, supplication, and influence peddling goes through the lower courts. Yet, as the painter makes clear, the stakes are low. No one can really influence the outcome of the case--at most they can tinker with the trajectory, to drag out the proceedings indefinitely while the mantle of guilt hovers above the accused.

Justice delayed, of course, is justice denied. But justice clearly cannot be hoped for. Ultimately, the Court is corrupt not because of the pathetic influence peddling that occurs in its lower levels. It is corrupt because it is not accountable to the society it serves. Perhaps the Law is internally consistent, but those outside its ranks and to whom it applies will never know. Allegations are never disclosed; evidence is never disclosed; ultimate judicial power is invisible; the word of law is available only to those who stand in judgment of the accused. Who can defend himself when he does not know the accusation? Who can defend herself

when she does not know the Law? Defense is distinctly frowned upon. The accused is generally considered to be guilty.

The Trial is generally thought to be, among other things, a condemnation of the intractable Austro-Hungarian bureaucracy--which Kafka, ensconced as he was in the State's insurance establishment, knew well. If the book offers a prescient portrait of the manipulative, unjust regimes that would begin to dominate Europe and Asia a decade after the author's death, it is not because the author offers a specific prophesy. Yet he does describe the seed: a society that accepts unaccountable governance in the name of necessity, which regards the law as divine Law because it declines to show itself.

Chapter 8:

Though it is not an easy decision, K. resolves to dispense with his lawyer's services. He goes to the lawyer's house one evening past ten o'clock. The door is opened by a somewhat pitiable figure--a wasted, bearded little man in his shirt-sleeves. K. catches sight of Leni rushing to another room in her nightgown. He demands to know of the little man whether he is Leni's lover. The man assures K. that he is not. He is merely Block, the tradesman, and a client of the lawyer. Block leads K. to the kitchen where Leni is preparing the lawyer's soup. K. is still mistrustful, but the other two manage to allay his suspicions. Block is simply too pathetic a creature.

Leni takes the lawyer his soup. K. takes a seat and questions Block about that man's case. Before telling K. his secrets, Block extracts from K. a promise to reciprocate. The lawyer is vindictive, and Block has not been entirely faithful. Block's case is more than five years old and has consumed the poor man's energy and resources. He has discreetly engaged five hack lawyers in addition to Herr Huld, and spends nearly every day in the lobby of the Law Court Offices. In fact, he was there the day K. first visited. There is a foolish superstition among accused men, says Block, which maintains that the outcome of a man's case can be read in the expression of his lips. The accused men waiting in the lobby declared that K.'s lips revealed a guilty verdict. The man who lost his composure in K.'s presence did so because he thought he read a sign concerning his own fate when he looked at K.'s lips. But all this is nonsense, says Block.

Block also mentions the "great lawyers," about whom every accused man dreams, but who are entirely inaccessible and unknown. Leni returns; K. treats her with his usual curtness. She reveals that Block sleeps in the house, in a tiny maid's chamber, because the lawyer never consents to see Block unless he feels like it. Block must therefore always be at the ready, in case the lawyer should suddenly agree to a meeting. The lawyer apparently finds Block annoying.

As K. gets up to see the lawyer, Block reminds him of his promise to share a secret. K. obliges: he announces that he is going to dismiss the lawyer. Both Block and Leni try to prevent him from committing this rash act, but K. slips into the lawyer's chamber and locks the door behind him.

The lawyer informs K. of a peculiarity of Leni's character. She finds all accused men extraordinarily attractive. K. informs the lawyer of his decision. The lawyer asks K. to reconsider. He admits a fondness for K. K. explains his frustrations with the way the case is being handled, and asks what measures the lawyer would take if he were to continue. Herr Huld claims he would continue with his current activities. K. is not interested. He is puzzled, however, as to why a seemingly wealthy and invalid lawyer should care so much about keeping a client.

The lawyer makes one more attempt to convince K. He wants to demonstrate to K. how accused men are normally treated, so that K. might realize how well he has been treated (or to what degree he has been ignored by the Court) thus far. Huld sends Leni to fetch the tradesman. K. watches how the two humiliate the man, how he fearfully allows himself to be humiliated. The lawyer seems to have absolute power over Block.

The chapter was never completed.

Commentary

Block is another willing informant on the doings of the Court, as well as another stranger who knows a fair amount about K.'s situation. He is five years into his case and seems a shell of a man. He's described physically as "dried up"; psychologically he has subjugated himself entirely to the lawyer. That he also clandestinely consults five hack lawyers behind the lawyer's back makes him that much more craven and pathetic. Is this the future life K. has to

look forward to? Is this the sort of freedom the painter claims he can help K. win? K. likens Block's behavior (and his treatment at the hands of Huld and Leni) to that of a dog. Indeed, when Leni catches the genuflecting Block worrying away at the rug, she grabs him by the collar just as one might a misbehaving household pet. Block, once a respected tradesman, has been reduced to doghood. This observation repulses and horrifies Joseph K.; it is a particularly resonant one in light of his dying utterance in Chapter Ten.

Chapter 9:

An influential Italian client is coming to town and K. has been charged with escorting the man to the city's cultural points of interest. K. has been assigned, or rather offered, many missions of late that take him away from his work. He wonders whether there might not be a plot afoot to keep him elsewhere and occupied while someone--the Assistant Manager, perhaps--goes through his papers or otherwise looks to damage his standing. He wants to concentrate on his work. It is the only way to solidify his standing at the bank, and he must be doubly on guard for the errors that have begun to creep into his efforts since his case began to tax his energy. Yet he accepts every special commission. Not to do so would be to refuse an honor and possibly to admit weakness or fear.

K. arrives at the office early and exhausted from having studied Italian grammar the night before. The Italian has also arrived early. The Manager, who speaks Italian, makes the introductions and helps K. to understand the visitor's meaning. The Italian has business to attend to and cannot see all of the city's sites. He proposes that K. meet him at the cathedral at 10 o'clock.

K. devotes the intervening hours to studying the Italian verbs he will need in order to be able to say anything intelligent about the cathedral. As he is about to leave the office, Leni calls. He tells her what he is doing, and she replies, "They're goading you." This annoys him, but as he hangs up he can't help but agree with her.

He goes to the cathedral and waits. The Italian is late. K. gives him a half-hour, then more, but the man does not come. It is raining outside, so K. waits longer, walking around the cathedral and leafing through a picture album he has brought with him. A caretaker catches K.'s eye and motions for K. to follow him. K. does for awhile, but soon desists and returns to the nave to sit. He notices a small, unusual pulpit that looks as if it would be an

uncomfortable place from which to preach. A preacher climbs up into the pulpit. It is an odd time for a sermon, and apart from K. and the caretaker, there is no audience. K. feels he should return to the office; realizing it would be difficult to leave once the sermon begins, he rises and walks toward the exit. A voice behind him calls out, "Joseph K.!" For a moment K. considers pretending not to hear or understand and continuing on his way. But he turns, and so must engage the priest.

The priest is in fact the prison chaplain, connected with the court. He has had K. summoned to this place. He tells K. that his case is going badly. It may never even get beyond the lower courts. K. believes the chaplain's intentions are good, and hopes that the chaplain might be able to give him some advice that will point a way "not toward some influential manipulation of the case, but toward a circumvention of it...a mode of living completely outside the jurisdiction of the Court." K. asks the chaplain to come down from the pulpit; the chaplain agrees.

The two walk together up and down the aisle. K. tells the chaplain that he trusts him more than anyone else connected with the Court and feels he can speak openly. The other replies that K. is deluded, and describes an allegory that is supposed to be illustrative of this delusion. This brief tale, drawn from the writings about the Law, tells of a man from the country who tries to gain admittance at an entrance to the Law, is always denied by the doorkeeper, and yet learns as he dies that this entrance was meant only for him. The chaplain and K. discuss several possible interpretations of this story--who is deluded, who is subservient to whom. At last the two pace in silence. K. says that he should probably go, but is disappointed when the chaplain simply dismisses him. K. asks why the chaplain was recently so friendly and helpful and now so indifferent. The chaplain reminds K. that he (the chaplain) is connected to the Court, and that "the Court wants nothing from you. It receives you when you come and dismisses you when you go."

Commentary

Kafka's parable of the entrance to the Law is as luminous as it is opaque. It seems to contain some essence of truth about the relationship between the citizen and the Law, or perhaps the human condition in general, but what--other than tragedy of one man's futile efforts--does it really relate? It is a Kafka story in miniature: a gnomic genesis of interminable commentary

and speculation. The chaplain offers K. the outlines of several prominent interpretations, but clearly he is only scratching the surface.

Is the man from the country meant to represent K.? Is the Law truly unreachable? Does the doorkeeper speak the truth? Is the doorkeeper, by way of his connection to the Law, beyond reproach. K. remarks that to consider the doorkeeper unimpeachable is to accept everything he says as the truth despite the fact that at least one of his statements is untrue. Perhaps the chaplain's most salient comment comes in his response: "...it is not necessary to accept everything as true, one must only accept it as necessary." This seems to be the *modus operandi* of the Law, the dynamo within the great machine of the Court, the divine principle before which the functionaries--and eventually the accused men--prostrate themselves. It is, as K. declares, a "melancholy thought" because it "turns lying into a universal principle." That universal lie of necessity--the mother of detention--keeps the mechanism moving forward and squelches potential challenges to the system. When the Law takes necessity as its model, justice is doomed. The terrible fact of *The Trial*, and of the parable, is that the men seeking justice eventually accept this warped universal principle and its skewed criteria; they submit to the necessity of their own exclusion or death.

Chapter 10:

On Joseph K.'s thirty-first birthday, two men in coats and top hats come for him. K. finds them to be ridiculous creatures, but goes with them. In the street, they take his arms in an unbreakable hold and the three of them move as one. At a deserted square, K. suddenly decides to resist, to force these warders to drag him. Then he sees Fraulein Burstner, or someone who looks reasonably like Fraulein Burstner, walk across the square. He realizes the futility of resistance, and instead strives to keep his mind clear and analytical until the end.

Once, on their journey, a policeman is on the verge of stopping them. They walk quickly past him, and K. himself leads the trio in running out of range from the officer. They walk out of town to a deserted quarry situated near an urban-looking house. There the two warders strip K. to the waist and awkwardly prop him against a bolder. One of the men removes a butcher's knife from his coat. The warders pass the knife back and forth, and K. realizes that he is meant to grab the knife and do himself in. He does not. In the window of the house, in the distance, he sees a figure with outstretched arms at the window. He wonders feverishly who it could be, what it could represent. K. makes a final gesture, raising his hand and extending his

fingers toward the figure in the window. One warder holds K. while the other stabs him in the heart. He sees them watching him, and makes a dying exclamation: "'Like a dog!' he said; it was as if the shame of it must outlive him."

Commentary

Some novels seem to peter out in a trail of ellipses, most of their good ideas spent or their plots and sub-plots resolved. *The Trial* ends with a full stop. The emotional and symbolic charge builds up fast through the final pages, culminating in a veritable thunderclap. Yet, more than anywhere else in the book (excepting, perhaps, the end of Chapter Eight), one feels acutely that this is an unfinished novel. What has K. done since his meeting with the chaplain? We want desperately to know. Surely he has struggled, explored new avenues, considered leaving town. Was he already so resigned to this ridiculous fate in Chapter Nine? How is it he comes to expect some sort of official visitor on his birthday? On a different note, the appearance of Fraulein Burstner reminds us of how entirely unresolved that whole affair was left, way back in the first half of the book. *The Trial* was written during 1914-1915 and then abandoned--for whatever reason, Kafka moved on to other projects. It is not quite whole; yet, as in all of Kafka's best work, *The Trial* is marked by the contradiction of hermetic clarity, of utterance that has the ring of truth and internal consistency, even if we cannot quite make out the note.

5 Characters of the novel:

Joseph K. - The hero and protagonist of the novel, K. is the Chief Clerk of a bank. Ambitious, shrewd, more competent than kind, he is on the fast track to success until he is arrested one morning for no reason. There begins his slide into desperation as he tries to grapple with an all-powerful Court and an invisible Law.

Fraulein Burstner - A boarder in the same house as Joseph K. She lets him kiss her one night, but then rebuffs his advances. She makes a brief reappearance in the novel's final pages.

Frau Grubach - The proprietress of the lodging house in which K. lives. She holds K. in high esteem.

Uncle Karl - K.'s impetuous uncle from the country, formerly his guardian. Karl insists that K. hire Huld, the lawyer.

Huld, the Lawyer - K.'s fustian advocate who provides precious little in the way of action and far too much in the way of anecdote.

Leni - Herr Huld's nurse, she's on fire for Joseph K. She soon becomes his lover. Apparently, she finds accused men extremely attractive--the fact of their indictment makes them irresistible to her.

Assistant Manager - K.'s unctuous rival at the Bank, only too willing to catch K. in a compromising situation.

Block, the Tradesman - Block is another accused man and client of Huld. His case is five year's old, and he is but a shadow of the prosperous man he once was. All his time, energy, and resources are now devoted to his case. Although he has hired hack lawyers on the side, he is completely and pathetically subservient to Huld.

Titorelli, the Painter - Titorelli inherited the position of Court Painter from his father. He knows a great deal about the comings and goings of the Court's lowest level. He offers to help K., and manages to unload a few identical landscape paintings on the accused man. If the novel had been finished, we might have heard more from Titorelli.

6 Themes and Symbols:

Power:

Kafka's *The Trial* is often read as a critique totalitarianism, a form of government power that is characterized by *total* government control of every aspect of daily life (hence *total*-itarianism), as well as a state *authority* that is not accountable to individual citizens and can pretty much do whatever it wants, regardless of what the law says (also known as authoritarianism). Kafka's story about an individual persecuted by the dizzying machinations of an unjust power has been read as an allegory for such modern totalitarian governments as Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and the Soviet Union. In fact, Kafka's allegory has been so effective that the term "kafkaesque" has entered our general vocabulary as a word that applies

to a state controlled by an authority beyond the reach of the law, dominated by an immense and labyrinthine bureaucracy, and saturated by a general state of paranoia where neighbors inform on each other to the government and random acts of violence are perpetrated against ordinary citizens.

Justice and Judgement:

Kafka's *Trial* questions the relationship of justice and the law (often capitalized in the novel as "the Law"). The thing about laws is that they're supposed to be just. If there's an unjust or an unfair law, we expect to be able to work to get the law overturned by appealing to higher principles of justice. (Consider, for example, the Civil Rights Movement. Racial segregation and discrimination were unjust; therefore we appealed to a higher principle of justice – racial equality – to eliminate those practices.)

But here's the thing about Kafka's vision of the Law: the Law is such an abstract ideal that it can have nothing to do with the ordinary lives of human beings. Put it this way: the idea that all human beings are equal is written into the United States' founding documents, but do we actually have a country where everybody is equal? Would it be fair for the government to come in and mandate certain types of equality? No matter how committed you are to democratic ideals, many of us would hesitate to give up our hard-earned wages – what we consider the individual's equally valid right to his or her own property. While the *ideal* that everybody is equal is just, actually putting it into practice could result in an unjust society where people's property is unfairly taken away from them.

Sex:

For a novel about a trial, there seems to be an awful lot of hanky-pankying going on. No matter how deeply the main character gets mired in his trial, he always seems to have time to flirt and seduce. While we never find out exactly what Josef K. is guilty of in *The Trial*, all of the sex he's having points to one of the main sources of guilt and shame in human society: sex. Both sex and criminality are aspects of human behavior that are associated with shame. But our shame concerning all matters sexual may be a more fundamental fact of being human than criminality, because sexuality is a quality we all share. If to be human is to be sexual, and to be sexual is to be guilty in the eyes of society, then according to this really depressing

social equation, we are all guilty without having done anything wrong. K.'s robust sexuality suggests that his unspecified crime may just be the simple fact of his being human.

Society and class:

The Trial is considered by many to be a dystopic, or negative, view of modern society. The novel shows the dysfunctional consequences of the forces of modernization on society. Instead of celebrating the city as a beacon of modern living, we get the city as an impoverished and sordid place, where the poor live in cramped and inhumane conditions. Instead of a society where individuals can pursue their own desires, we get a society that is a force of conformity and ordinariness, all the more effective because of the high concentration of people in cities. In Kafka's modern world, traditional social ties such as interpersonal relationships (such as that between K. and his family) deteriorate, leaving only relations of persecution and exploitation perpetrated by the court. By setting the court in one of the city's poorest districts, the novel emphasizes how the court enforces social conformity by quashing individual free will.

Isolation:

Corresponding to Kafka's vision of an all-encompassing but indifferent society in *The Trial* is the individual's intense feelings of isolation, alienation, and anxiety. The court stands in for a society that insists on conformity at all costs, and the individual is guilty simply for being an individual. The whole idea of a defense in this context is paradoxical. The purpose of a defense is to give the individual an opportunity to defend his innocence, but to defend his innocence is to assert himself. And to assert himself, to defend himself and his actions vocally, is by nature criminal in a society that just wants the individual to shut up and blend in. As the novel shows through its depiction of the main character and other defendants, the court infiltrates all aspects of a defendant's life. The experience of a trial leads to an all-pervasive self-consciousness on the part of the defendant accompanied by feelings of inferiority, insecurity, and paranoia.

Life Consciousness and Existence:

We often use terms such as "existential" and "absurd" to describe works that are both intellectually challenging and depressing, works where nothing seems to happen but

something "deep" seems to be going on, even if we can't explain what that is. It's no wonder that Kafka's *The Trial* has often been associated with these terms because the novel's view of life seems to be pretty dismal. There doesn't seem to be any redemptive moment in the novel where we can say, "Ah, here the main character has shown himself to be heroic or inspiring or exceptionally wise," or "Voila, this is the meaning of life and this is why we should keep on living." Our tried-and-true resources of hard work and common sense don't seem to have any effect in Kafka's world. Instead, in the general spiritual landscape of helplessness, we have characters who confront again and again the hopelessness of their efforts. And corresponding to this general hopelessness is a state of mind that is distracted and exhausted, unable to follow a thought to its reasonable and logical end, unable to formulate a meaningful purpose in life. But this state of mind, at the endpoint of fatigue, is really the heart of Kafka's ironic way of looking at the world, because it is only when the main character grows tired of struggling for his own selfish needs that he gains access to any insight into his life at all.

Philosophy:

We hesitate to lob a big old word like "hermeneutics" in your direction. But hermeneutics is a general term that describes philosophies that attempt to wrestle with such questions of interpretation as: How do we interpret a literary, philosophical, or religious text? What are some of the assumptions and biases we bring to a text when we attempt to understand it? What elements in a text do we look at in order to make sense of it, to get some meaning out of it? What elements of a text remain mysterious and enigmatic, defying our every attempt to understand it? More generally, what is the place of logic and philosophy in a work of fiction? In our everyday lives?

But as these questions hopefully show, hermeneutics, or the question of interpretation, is at the heart of Kafka's *Trial*.

First of all, there's the obvious question of interpretation involved in the trial itself. How do we *know* what Josef K. did, and what evidence do we have to suggest his guilt? Is there something fundamentally unknowable about Josef K.'s crime, whatever it is? And does it indicate something fundamentally unknowable about all human existence?

Secondly, the novel keeps thrusting parables at us, demanding us to try and interpret these

quizzical little stories. Chapter 9 is just a long lesson in how to read a story, as the prison chaplain guides Josef K. through a parable about the Law. The religious context of the story – they're in a cathedral – suggests that the novel is engaging with the Biblical roots of hermeneutics, its foundation in problems of interpreting the many stories that make up the Old and New Testaments. Kafka's parable takes on the Biblical interpretive tradition that relies on the idea that there is some way of correctly interpreting these stories to get at a fundamental "truth" of human existence. For Kafka's novel, there is no "truth" – just endless possibilities for interpretation.

Art and Culture:

Like K.'s sexual shenanigans, art provides one of the seeming digressions in *The Trial* that is actually a critical part of the whole story. In addition to the central discussion of painting in Chapter 8, numerous references to the theater and to literature throughout the text indicate the novel's own attempt to wrestle with the fact that it is itself a work of fiction, a work of art. In the novel, all of these artistic artifacts fascinate and transfix the characters. They demand the characters' attention, and the characters can't help getting lost in their images. The power of art over the characters' minds and emotions parallels the court's equal power to fascinate and attract, as K.'s inability to resist being absorbed into the court's system attests. But the flip side is that art can also provide a way for characters to gain mastery over their situation, as when K. acts out the drama of his interrogation for another character. Art isn't just a fancy way to dress up a wall in the novel; it's a way of making sense of the world, of arranging your impressions of the world in a way that makes sense to you. Thus art, and by extension Kafka's novel, can provide access to certain truths about life that are otherwise inaccessible.

7 Questions for Practice:

Is there a connection between the Court and dark, poorly ventilated interiors?

There seems to be. You may arrive at your own conclusions of metaphor or symbol, but the relationship at least is fairly consistent. The meeting hall of the first interrogation is dim and hazy. The atmosphere of the law offices is suffocating and sends K. into collapse. The Whipper whips the warders in a wood closet. The Court's painter lives in an insufferably stuffy attic. K.'s consultations with the lawyer take place in the latter's darkened sickroom. Even the cathedral, where K. meets the chaplain, is virtually pitch black due to the storm

brewing outside. All of this can have a profound effect on the reader, who may feel herself as confined by the descriptions of these interiors just as by the stonewalling of the Court or K.'s obdurate inability to see the danger he's in.

Is K's inability to "think outside the box," his susceptibility to being drawn into the process of the trial, the basis of his eventual guilt?

Kafka invites you to ask such questions, and lets them stand without answer. Could K. have survived if he had simply gone away? Could he have wanted more to prevail? The question is open. "Logic is doubtless unshakable, but it cannot withstand a man who wants to go on living," K. says to himself, moments before he is killed. And yet, whatever we determine to be the state of K.'s will, Kafka also shows us that will is not enough. Consider the opaque yet radiant parable of the man who asks admittance to the Law. Certainly that man does not lack will--he expends his life in his will to encounter the Law, though he is apparently free to abandon his quest and simply walk away. But abandonment of the Law, of Logic, is abandonment of justice, of dignity, of personhood. It may constitute thinking outside the box, but it is also a retreat (and to where?). Besides, nowhere is it stated that K. can merely abandon the Court, that the Court excuses those who fail to be drawn into its web of doubt, pandering, and self-recrimination. We do not know the Court's jurisdiction. There is neither a clear way out nor an unequivocal indication of doom until doom is at hand. In this light, blaming K. for his own demise is analogous to blaming victims of the Nazi death machine for not perceiving in advance the full trajectory of depravity, or blaming Stalin's victims--who never had the option of stepping beyond the purview of a perverse Law--for their fate.

To what extent does K. believe that he is guilty?

We are not given clear indications. One thing is certain, though: K. is expecting someone to come for him on the morning of his thirty-first birthday. He perhaps hopes for someone other than the two clowns who show up, but he nonetheless is expecting an emissary. Since he is expecting someone and seems to know roughly what is going to happen, and since he has not made an attempt at escape or any final defense, he appears to have accepted the verdict. As the prison chaplain remarked, "it is not necessary to accept everything as true, one must only accept it as necessary." Perhaps K. accepts his execution not because he believes he is truly

guilty, but because--and what is more shameful--he accepts the Court's argument that it is necessary.

If, in the hermetic parable "The Doorkeeper," the man from the country is free to go away, why does he remain at the entrance to the Law?

How would you characterize the women of *The Trial*? Do they seem like real people?

Was there any way for K. to avoid ending up facing execution in the quarry?Describe the paintings that are represented in the novel. What are the primary topics of these paintings? What kinds of techniques or styles are used in these paintings? What do these paintings tell us about their subjects? About the painter?

Take a look at moments in the novel that focus on theater, drama, or acting. What elements in the novel are theatrical? How do the dramatic elements in the novel affect our understanding of the courts? That is, if the novel keeps revealing how the courts depend on theatrical elements like performance, staging, costumes, and illusion (see for example K.'s speech at his initial inquiry), does that make the courts seem more absurd or more horrible?

How do paintings, stories, and drama help the characters make sense of the court system and their place in it? Consider, for example, why we learn so much about the courts from Titorelli, who's just a court painter, or how K.'s acting out his arrest for Fraülein Bürstner might serve as a form of therapy for him.

Take a look at the way K. is treated during his arrest, inquiry, and execution. What are some ways that K. was unfairly treated?

Take a look at the passages where the courts are described. How would you describe the bureaucracy of the court system? What are some of the different types of people who work in the court system? Who's on top? At the bottom? What are some of the effects of having all the authority concentrated at the top of the bureaucracy, with all the power in the hands of a few secret, inaccessible individuals?

Where in the novel do you see the influence of the courts extending beyond the court system and into other areas, such as business, religion, art, and everyday life?

The Outsider

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7 Important Questions and Answers

1 Introduction:

The Outsider or ***The Stranger*** is a novel by Albert Camus published in 1942. Its theme and outlook are often cited as exemplars of Camus's philosophy of the absurd and existentialism, though Camus personally rejected the latter label.

The titular character is Meursault, an indifferent French Algerian ("a citizen of France domiciled in North Africa, a man of the Mediterranean, an homme du midi yet one who hardly partakes of the traditional Mediterranean culture" who, after attending his mother's funeral, apathetically kills an Arab man whom he recognises in French Algiers. The story is divided into two parts: Meursault's first-person narrative view before and after the murder, respectively.

In January 1955, Camus said, "I summarized *The Stranger* a long time ago, with a remark I admit was highly paradoxical: 'In our society any man who does not weep at his mother's funeral runs the risk of being sentenced to death.' I only meant that the hero of my book is condemned because he does not play the game.

In a heated moment, Meursault shoots and kills another man on a beach. Camus uses the events leading up to the shooting, and Meursault’s subsequent legal trial and incarceration, to explore issues of meaning and meaninglessness in life. In other words, Camus's book is about big ideas.

Camus was a famous French thinker known for his philosophy of the absurd, a close cousin to existentialism. (BTW, throughout his life Camus swore that he was *not* an existentialist. He was a bit touchy on the subject, actually.) Today, Camus is most famous for three big novels: *The Stranger* (1942), The Plague (1947), and The Fall (1956). *The Stranger* is a great introduction to Camus, because his later novels kept getting more complex.

Through *The Stranger*, Camus explores his own pet philosophy: the absurd. In short, absurdism says the world is devoid of rational meaning. But you can read more about that in our discussion of "Themes: Philosophical Viewpoints." The Nobel Prize Committee quite rationally thought Camus should win some money, so they gave him the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957, not for *The Stranger per se*, but for his generally "important literary production, which with clear-sighted earnestness illuminates the problems of the human conscience in our times."

2 About the author:

Albert Camus was born on November 7, 1913, in French colonial Algeria. In 1914, his father was killed in World War I, at the Battle of the Marne. Albert, his mother, and his brother shared a two-bedroom apartment with the family's maternal grandmother and a paralyzed uncle. Despite his family's extreme poverty, Camus attended the University of Algiers, supporting his education by working a series of odd jobs. However, one of several severe attacks of tuberculosis forced him to drop out of school. The poverty and illness Camus experienced as a youth greatly influenced his writing.

After dropping out of the university, Camus eventually entered the world of political journalism. While working for an anti-colonialist newspaper, he wrote extensively about poverty in Algeria. From 1935 to 1938, Camus ran the Théâtre de l'Equipe, an organization that attempted to attract working-class audiences to performances of great dramatic works. During World War II, Camus went to Paris and became a leading writer for the anti-German resistance movement. He was also the editor of *Combat*, an important underground newspaper.

While in wartime Paris, Camus developed his philosophy of the absurd. A major component of this philosophy was Camus's assertion that life has no rational or redeeming meaning. The

experience of World War II led many other intellectuals to similar conclusions. Faced with the horrors of Hitler's Nazi regime and the unprecedented slaughter of the War, many could no longer accept that human existence had any purpose or discernible meaning. Existence seemed simply, to use Camus's term, absurd.

The Stranger, Camus's first novel, is both a brilliantly crafted story and an illustration of Camus's absurdist world view. Published in 1942, the novel tells the story of an emotionally detached, amoral young man named Meursault. He does not cry at his mother's funeral, does not believe in God, and kills a man he barely knows without any discernible motive. For his crime, Meursault is deemed a threat to society and sentenced to death. When he comes to accept the "gentle indifference of the world," he finds peace with himself and with the society that persecutes him.

Camus's absurdist philosophy implies that moral orders have no rational or natural basis. Yet Camus did not approach the world with moral indifference, and he believed that life's lack of a "higher" meaning should not necessarily lead one to despair. On the contrary, Camus was a persistent humanist. He is noted for his faith in man's dignity in the face of what he saw as a cold, indifferent universe.

In 1942, the same year that *The Stranger* was published, Camus also published *The Myth of Sisyphus*, his famous philosophical essay on the absurd. These two works helped establish Camus's reputation as an important and brilliant literary figure. Over the course of his career he produced numerous novels, plays, and essays that further developed his philosophy. Among his most notable novels are *The Plague*, published in 1947, and *The Fall*, published in 1956. Along with *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *The Rebel* stands as his best-known philosophical essay. In recognition of his contribution to French and world literature, Camus was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957. Tragically, he died in an automobile accident just three years later.

In the midst of the widespread intellectual and moral bewilderment that followed World War II, Camus's was a voice advocating the values of justice and human dignity. Though his career was cut short, he remains one of the most influential authors of the twentieth century, regarded both for the quality of his fiction and for the depth and insightfulness of his philosophy.

Camus, Existentialism & *The Stranger*

The Stranger is often referred to as an "existential" novel, but this description is not necessarily accurate. The term "existentialism" is a broad and far-reaching classification that means many different things to many different people, and is often misapplied or overapplied. As it is most commonly used, existentialism refers to the idea that there is no "higher" meaning to the universe or to man's existence, and no rational order to the events of the world. According to this common definition of existentialism, human life is not invested with a redemptive or affirming purpose—there is nothing beyond man's physical existence.

Some ideas in *The Stranger* clearly resemble this working definition of existentialism, but the broader philosophy of existentialism includes aspects far beyond this definition that are not present in *The Stranger*. Moreover, Camus himself rejected the application of the "existential" label to *The Stranger*. Hence, this SparkNote approaches *The Stranger* from the philosophical perspective of the absurd. "The absurd" is a term Camus himself coined, and a philosophy that he himself developed. Reading *The Stranger* with Camus's philosophy of the absurd in mind sheds a good deal of light on the text.

Although Camus's philosophical ideas resonate strongly within the text, it is important to keep in mind that *The Stranger* is a novel, not a philosophical essay. When reading the novel, character development, plot, and prose style demand just as much attention as the specifics of the absurd. This explanation only discusses the absurd when such discussion provides insight on the text.

3 Summary of the Text:

Meursault, the narrator, is a young man living in Algiers. After receiving a telegram informing him of his mother's death, he takes a bus to Marengo, where his mother had been living in an old persons' home. He sleeps for almost the entire trip. When he arrives, he speaks to the director of the home. The director allows Meursault to see his mother, but Meursault finds that her body has already been sealed in the coffin. He declines the caretaker's offer to open the coffin.

That night, Meursault keeps vigil over his mother's body. Much to his displeasure, the talkative caretaker stays with him the whole time. Meursault smokes a cigarette, drinks

coffee, and dozes off. The next morning, before the funeral, he meets with the director again. The director informs him that Thomas Perez, an old man who had grown very close to Meursault's mother, will be attending the funeral service. The funeral procession heads for the small local village, but Perez has difficulty keeping up and eventually faints from the heat. Meursault reports that he remembers little of the funeral. That night, he happily arrives back in Algiers.

The next day, Meursault goes to the public beach for a swim. There, he runs into Marie Cardona, his former co-worker. The two make a date to see a comedy at the movie theater that evening. After the movie they spend the night together. When Meursault wakes up, Marie is gone. He stays in bed until noon and then sits on his balcony until evening, watching the people pass on the street.

The following day, Monday, Meursault returns to work. He has lunch with his friend Emmanuel and then works all afternoon. While walking upstairs to his apartment that night, Meursault runs into Salamano, an old man who lives in his building and owns a mangy dog. Meursault also runs into his neighbor, Raymond Sintes, who is widely rumored to be a pimp. Raymond invites Meursault over for dinner. Over the meal, Raymond recounts how he beat up his mistress after he discovered that she had been cheating on him. As a result, he got into a fight with her brother. Raymond now wants to torment his mistress even more, but he needs Meursault to write a letter to lure his mistress back to him. Meursault agrees and writes the letter that night.

The following Saturday, Marie visits Meursault at his apartment. She asks Meursault if he loves her, and he replies that "it didn't mean anything," but probably not. The two then hear shouting coming from Raymond's apartment. They go out into the hall and watch as a policeman arrives. The policeman slaps Raymond and says that he will be summoned to the police station for beating up his mistress. Later, Raymond asks Meursault to testify on his behalf, and Meursault agrees. That night, Raymond runs into Salamano, who laments that his dog has run away.

Marie asks Meursault if he wants to marry her. He replies indifferently but says that they can get married if she wants to, so they become engaged. The following Sunday, Meursault, Marie, and Raymond go to a beach house owned by Masson, one of Raymond's friends. They swim happily in the ocean and then have lunch. That afternoon, Masson, Raymond, and

Meursault run into two Arabs on the beach, one of whom is the brother of Raymond's mistress. A fight breaks out and Raymond is stabbed. After tending to his wounds, Raymond returns to the beach with Meursault. They find the Arabs at a spring. Raymond considers shooting them with his gun, but Meursault talks him out of it and takes the gun away. Later, however, Meursault returns to the spring to cool off, and, for no apparent reason, he shoots Raymond's mistress's brother.

Meursault is arrested and thrown into jail. His lawyer seems disgusted at Meursault's lack of remorse over his crime, and, in particular, at Meursault's lack of grief at his mother's funeral. Later, Meursault meets with the examining magistrate, who cannot understand Meursault's actions. The magistrate brandishes a crucifix and demands that Meursault put his faith in God. Meursault refuses, insisting that he does not believe in God. The magistrate cannot accept Meursault's lack of belief, and eventually dubs him "Monsieur Antichrist."

One day, Marie visits Meursault in prison. She forces herself to smile during the visit, and she expresses hope that Meursault will be acquitted and that they will get married. As he awaits his trial, Meursault slowly adapts to prison life. His isolation from nature, women, and cigarettes torments him at first, but he eventually adjusts to living without them, and soon does not even notice their absence. He manages to keep his mind occupied, and he sleeps for most of each day.

Meursault is taken to the courthouse early on the morning of his trial. Spectators and members of the press fill the courtroom. The subject of the trial quickly shifts away from the murder to a general discussion of Meursault's character, and of his reaction to his mother's death in particular. The director and several other people who attended the vigil and the funeral are called to testify, and they all attest to Meursault's lack of grief or tears. Marie reluctantly testifies that the day after his mother's funeral she and Meursault went on a date and saw a comedic movie. During his summation the following day, the prosecutor calls Meursault a monster and says that his lack of moral feeling threatens all of society. Meursault is found guilty and is sentenced to death by beheading.

Meursault returns to prison to await his execution. He struggles to come to terms with his situation, and he has trouble accepting the certainty and inevitability of his fate. He imagines escaping and he dreams of filing a successful legal appeal. One day, the chaplain comes to visit against Meursault's wishes. He urges Meursault to renounce his atheism and turn to

God, but Meursault refuses. Like the magistrate, the chaplain cannot believe that Meursault does not long for faith and the afterlife. Meursault suddenly becomes enraged, grabs the chaplain, and begins shouting at him. He declares that he is correct in believing in a meaningless, purely physical world. For the first time, Meursault truly embraces the idea that human existence holds no greater meaning. He abandons all hope for the future and accepts the "gentle indifference of the world." This acceptance makes Meursault feel happy.

4 Analysis of the novel:

Part One: Chapter 1

Meursault, the novel's narrator and protagonist, receives a telegram telling him that his mother has died. She had been living in an old persons' home in Marengo, outside of Algiers. Meursault asks his boss for two days' leave from work to attend the funeral. His boss grudgingly grants the request, and makes Meursault feel almost guilty for asking. Meursault catches the two o'clock bus to Marengo, and sleeps for nearly the entire trip.

When Meursault arrives, he meets with the director of the old persons' home, who assures Meursault that he should not feel bad for having sent his mother there. The director asserts that it was the best decision Meursault could have made, given his modest salary. He tells Meursault that a religious funeral has been planned for his mother, but Meursault knows that his mother never cared about religion. After the brief conversation, the director takes Meursault to the small mortuary where his mother's coffin has been placed.

Alone, Meursault sees that the coffin has already been sealed. The caretaker rushes in and offers to open the casket, but Meursault tells him not to bother. To Meursault's annoyance, the caretaker then stays in the room, chatting idly about his life and about how funeral vigils are shorter in the countryside because bodies decompose more quickly in the heat. Meursault thinks this information is "interesting and [makes] sense."

Meursault spends the night keeping vigil over his mother's body. The caretaker offers him a cup of coffee, and, in turn, Meursault gives the caretaker a cigarette. Meursault finds the atmosphere in the mortuary pleasant and he dozes off. He is awakened by the sound of his mother's friends from the old persons' home shuffling into the mortuary. One of the women

cries mournfully, annoying Meursault. Eventually he falls back asleep, as do nearly all of his mother's friends.

The next morning, the day of the funeral, Meursault again meets with the director of the old persons' home. The director asks Meursault if he wants to see his mother one last time before the coffin is sealed permanently, but Meursault declines. The director tells Meursault about Thomas Perez, the only resident of the home who will be allowed to attend the funeral. Perez and Meursault's mother had become nearly inseparable before she died. Other residents had joked that he was her fiancé.

The funeral procession slowly makes its way toward the village. When one of the undertaker's assistants asks Meursault if his mother was old, Meursault responds vaguely because he does not know her exact age. The oppressive heat weighs heavily on him during the long walk. He notices that Thomas Perez cannot keep up, and keeps falling behind the procession. A nurse tells Meursault that he will get sunstroke if he walks too slowly, but will work up a sweat and catch a chill in church if he walks too quickly. Meursault agrees, thinking, "There was no way out." He remembers little of the funeral, aside from Perez's tear-soaked face and the fact that the old man fainted from the heat. As he rides home on the bus to Algiers, Meursault is filled with joy at the prospect of a good night's sleep.

She was right. There was no way out. Meursault immediately reveals himself to be indifferent toward emotion and interaction with others. Instead of grieving at the news of his mother's death, he is cold, detached, and indifferent. When he receives the telegram, his primary concern is figuring out on which day his mother died. The fact that he has no emotional reaction at all makes Meursault difficult to categorize. If he were happy that his mother died, he could be cast simply as immoral or a monster. But Meursault is neither happy nor unhappy—he is indifferent.

Though Meursault tends to ignore the emotional, social, and interpersonal content of situations, he is far from indifferent when it comes to the realm of the physical and practical. In this chapter, Meursault focuses on the practical details surrounding his mother's death. He worries about borrowing appropriate funeral clothing from a friend, and he is interested in the caretaker's anecdote about how the length of a vigil depends on how long it takes before the body begins to decompose.

Meursault takes particular interest in nature and the weather. Just before the funeral, he is able to enjoy the beautiful weather and scenery, despite the sad occasion. Similarly, during the funeral procession, Meursault feels no grief or sadness, but he finds the heat of the day nearly unbearable.

Meursault's narration varies in a way that reflects his attitudes toward the world around him. When describing social or emotional situations, his sentences are short, precise, and offer minimal detail. He tells only the essentials of what he sees or does, rarely using metaphors or other rhetorical flourishes. These meager descriptions display Meursault's indifference to society and to the people around him. Meursault's narrative expands greatly when he talks about topics, such as the weather, that directly relate to his physical condition. When describing the effects of the heat during the funeral procession, for instance, he employs metaphor, personification, and other literary devices.

Meursault's belief that the world is meaningless and purposeless becomes apparent in this chapter through Camus's use of irony. Thomas Perez, the one person who actually cares about Madame Meursault, cannot keep up with her funeral procession because of his ailing physical condition. This sad detail is incompatible with any sentimental or humanistic interpretation of Madame Meursault's death. Perez's slowness is simply the result of his old age, and no grand or comforting meaning can be assigned to it or drawn from it. We frequently see such irony undercutting any notions of a higher, controlling order operating within *The Stranger*.

Part One: Chapters 2–3

Summary: Chapter 2

Meursault suddenly realizes why his boss was annoyed at his request for two days' leave from work. Because his mother's funeral was on a Friday, counting the weekend, Meursault essentially received four days off rather than two. Meursault goes swimming at a public beach, where he runs into Marie Cardona, a former co-worker of his. He helps her onto a float, and after admiring her beauty, he climbs up next to her on the float. He rests his head on her body, and they lie together for a while, looking at the sky. They swim happily together and flirt over the course of the afternoon, and Marie accepts Meursault's invitation to see a

movie. She is somewhat surprised to learn that Meursault's mother was buried just a day earlier, but she quickly forgets it. After the movie, Marie spends the night with Meursault.

Marie is gone when Meursault awakes. He decides against having his usual lunch at Celeste's because he wants to avoid the inevitable questions about his mother. He stays in bed until noon, then spends the entire afternoon on his balcony, smoking, eating, and observing the assorted people on the street as they come and go. The weather is beautiful. As evening approaches, Meursault buys some food and cooks dinner. After his meal he muses that yet another Sunday is over. His mother is buried, and he must return to work in the morning. He concludes that nothing has changed after all.

Summary: Chapter 3

The next day, Meursault goes to work. His boss is friendly and asks Meursault about his mother. Meursault and his co-worker, Emmanuel, go to Celeste's for lunch. Celeste asks Meursault if everything is alright, but Meursault changes the subject after only a brief response. He takes a nap and then returns to work for the rest of the afternoon. After work, Meursault runs into his neighbor, Salamano, who is on the stairs with his dog. The dog suffers from mange, so its skin has the same scabby appearance as its elderly master's. Salamano walks the dog twice a day, beating it and swearing at it all the while.

Raymond Sintes, another neighbor, invites Meursault to dinner. Raymond is widely believed to be a pimp, but when anyone asks about his occupation he replies that he is a "warehouse guard." Over dinner, Raymond requests Meursault's advice about something, and then asks Meursault whether he would like to be "pals." Meursault offers no objection, so Raymond launches into his story.

Raymond tells Meursault that when he suspected that his mistress was cheating on him, he beat her, and she left him. This altercation led Raymond into a fight with his mistress's brother, an Arab. Raymond is still attracted to his mistress, but wants to punish her for her infidelity. His idea is to write a letter to incite her guilt and make her return to him. He plans to sleep with her, and "right at the last minute," spit in her face. Raymond then asks Meursault to write the letter, and Meursault responds that he would not mind doing it. Raymond is pleased with Meursault's effort, so he tells Meursault that they are now "pals."

In his narrative, Meursault reflects that he "didn't mind" being pals with Raymond. As Meursault returns to his room, he hears Salamano's dog crying softly.

Analysis: Chapters 2–3

Meursault appears heartless for failing to express grief or even to care about his mother's death. Yet to condemn and dismiss him risks missing much of the meaning of the novel. *The Stranger*, though it explores Camus's philosophy of the absurd, is not meant to be read as a tale containing a lesson for our moral improvement. Camus's philosophy of the absurd characterizes the world and human existence as having no rational purpose or meaning. According to Camus's philosophy, the universe is indifferent to human struggles, and Meursault's indifferent personality embodies this philosophy. He does not attempt to assign a rational order to the events around him, and he is largely indifferent to human activity. Because Meursault does not see his mother's death as part of a larger structure of human existence, he can easily make a date, go to a comedy, and have sex the day after his mother's funeral. Meursault is Camus's example of someone who does not need a rational world view to function.

Meursault's interactions with Marie on the beach show the importance he places on the physical aspects of existence. He reports to us almost nothing about Marie's personality, but he carefully describes their physical interactions. The prose in his description of lying on the float with Marie and looking up at the sky is unusually warm and heartfelt. In this passage, it even seems that Meursault is happy. When he describes watching people from his balcony the following day, he again seems content.

While watching from his balcony, Meursault does not express any sort of judgment about the people he sees—he simply notices their primary characteristics. While the people he watches obviously attach great importance to their own activities, Meursault sees them as just part of another Sunday, like any other. Throughout the novel, Meursault plays this role of the detached observer. Just as he does not pass judgment on those he sees from far above on his balcony, so too does he refrain from judging the more significant characters with whom he interacts throughout the novel. Meursault will not commit to either condemning or defending Salamano's treatment of his dog. Likewise, while he does not expressly condone Raymond's treatment of his mistress, neither does Meursault refuse to participate in Raymond's scheme.

Meursault and Raymond seem to display similarly indifferent responses to the world around them, but Raymond in fact serves as a foil for Meursault. In contrast with Meursault, who is amoral, meaning he does not make moral distinctions, Raymond is clearly immoral: he beats up his mistress and he fights with her brother. Moreover, Raymond's manner of convincing Meursault to assist him in his scheme to take further revenge on his mistress seems somewhat manipulative. Raymond's plan for revenge crystallizes the distinction between Meursault and Raymond. Raymond plans to make love to his mistress and then spit in her face. He uses the physical act of sex as a tool for humiliation and revenge. Meursault, conversely, sees his sexual affair with Marie as a source of delight, in much the same way that he responds positively to other physical aspects of life.

The following Saturday, Meursault goes swimming again with Marie. He is intensely aroused from the first moment he sees her. After the swim, they hurry back to Meursault's apartment to have sex. Marie spends the night and stays for lunch the following day. Meursault tells her the story of Salamano and his dog, and she laughs. Then Marie asks Meursault if he loves her. He replies that, though "it [doesn't] mean anything, he [doesn't] think so." Meursault's response makes Marie look sad.

Marie and Meursault can hear an argument in Raymond's apartment. The tenants of the building gather on the landing and listen outside the door to the sounds of Raymond beating his mistress. A police officer arrives. Raymond's mistress informs the officer that Raymond beat her and the cop slaps Raymond in the face. He then orders Raymond to wait in his apartment until he is summoned to the police station. Later that afternoon, Raymond visits Meursault in his apartment. He asks Meursault to go to the police station to testify that his mistress had cheated on him. Meursault agrees. After an evening out, the two men return to their apartment building to find Salamano desperately searching for his dog, who ran away from him at the Parade Ground. Meursault says that if the dog is at the pound, he can pay a fee to have it returned. Salamano curses the dog when he hears this, but later that night, Meursault hears Salamano crying in his room.

Summary: Chapter 3

The following summer, Meursault's trial begins. Meursault is surprised to find the courtroom packed with people. Even the woman he saw checking off radio programs at Celeste's is

there. The press has given his case a great deal of publicity because the summer is a slow season for news.

The judge asks Meursault why he put his mother in a home. Meursault replies that he did not have enough money to care for her. When the judge asks Meursault if the decision tormented him, Meursault explains that both he and his mother became used to their new situations because they did not expect anything from one another.

The director of the home confirms that Madame Meursault complained about Meursault's decision to put her in the home. The director says that he was surprised by Meursault's "calm" during his mother's funeral. He remembers that Meursault declined to see his mother's body and did not cry once. One of the undertaker's assistants reported that Meursault did not even know how old his mother was. Meursault realizes that the people in the courtroom hate him.

The caretaker testifies that Meursault smoked a cigarette and drank coffee during his vigil. Meursault's lawyer insists the jury take note that the caretaker had likewise smoked during the vigil, accepting Meursault's offer of a cigarette. After the caretaker admits to offering Meursault coffee in the first place, the prosecutor derides Meursault as a disloyal son for not refusing the coffee. Thomas Perez takes the stand and recalls being too overcome with sadness during the funeral to notice whether or not Meursault cried. Celeste, claiming Meursault as his friend, attributes Meursault's killing of the Arab to bad luck. Marie's testimony reveals Meursault's plan to marry her. The prosecutor stresses that Marie and Meursault's sexual relationship began the weekend after the funeral and that they went to see a comedy at the movie theater that day. Favorable accounts—of Meursault's honesty and decency from Masson, and of Meursault's kindness to Salamano's dog from Salamano—counter the prosecutor's accusations. Raymond testifies that it was just by chance that Meursault became involved in his dispute with his mistress's brother. The prosecutor retorts by asking if it was just chance that Meursault wrote the letter to Raymond's mistress, testified on Raymond's behalf at the police station, and went to the beach the day of the crime.

Summary: Chapter 4

In his closing argument, the prosecutor cites Meursault's obvious intelligence and lack of remorse as evidence of premeditated murder. Reminding the jury that the next trial on the

court's schedule involves parricide (the murder of a close relative), the prosecutor alleges that Meursault's lack of grief over his mother's death threatens the moral basis of society. In a moral sense, the prosecutor argues, Meursault is just as guilty as the man who killed his own father. Calling for the death penalty, the prosecutor elaborates that Meursault's actions have paved the way for the man who killed his father, so Meursault must be considered guilty of the other man's crime as well.

Meursault denies having returned to the beach with the intention of killing the Arab. When the judge asks him to clarify his motivation for the crime, Meursault blurts out that he did it "because of the sun." Meursault's lawyer claims that Meursault did a noble thing by sending his mother to a home because he could not afford to care for her. Making Meursault feel further excluded from his own case, Meursault's lawyer offers an interpretation of the events that led up to the crime, speaking in the first person, as though he were Meursault. Meursault's mind drifts again during his lawyer's interminable argument. Meursault is found guilty of premeditated murder and sentenced to death by guillotine.

Analysis: Chapters 3–4

In *The Stranger*, Camus seeks to undermine the sense of reassurance that courtroom dramas typically provide. Such narratives reassure us not only that truth will always prevail, but that truth actually exists. They uphold our judicial system as just, despite its flaws. Ultimately, these narratives reassure us that we live in a world governed by reason and order. Camus sees such reassurance as a silly and false illusion. Because there is no rational explanation for Meursault's murder of the Arab, the authorities seek to construct an explanation of their own, which they base on false assumptions. By imposing a rational order on logically unrelated events, the authorities make Meursault appear to be a worse character than he is.

Camus portrays the process of accusation and judgment as hopeless, false, and irrational. Society demands that a rational interpretation be imposed on the facts and events of Meursault's life, whether or not such an interpretation is possible. Meursault's lawyer and the prosecutor both offer false explanations, leaving the jury with a choice between two lies. The prosecutor manufactures a meaningful, rational connection between Meursault's trial and the upcoming parricide trial, even though no actual link exists between the two cases. However, the prosecutor has no trouble imposing enough meaning to convince the jury that a link does in fact exist, and that Meursault deserves a death sentence.

During his trial, Meursault comes to understand that his failure to interpret or find meaning in his own life has left him vulnerable to others, who will impose such meaning for him. Until this point, Meursault has unthinkingly drifted from moment to moment, lacking the motivation or ability to examine his life as a narrative with a past, present, and future. Even during the early part of trial he watches as if everything were happening to someone else. Only well into the trial does Meursault suddenly realize that the prosecutor has successfully manufactured an interpretation of Meursault's life, and that, in the jury's eyes, he likely appears guilty. Meursault's own lawyer not only imposes yet another manufactured interpretation of Meursault's life, but even goes so far as to deliver this interpretation in the first person, effectively stealing Meursault's own point of view when making the argument.

The trial forces Meursault to confront his existence consciously because he is suddenly being held accountable for it. As he hears positive, negative, and neutral interpretations of his character, he recognizes that part of his being evades his control, because it exists only in the minds of others. All the witnesses discuss the same man, Meursault, but they offer differing interpretations of his character. In each testimony, meaning is constructed exclusively by the witness—Meursault has nothing to do with it.

Summary: Chapter 5

I said that people never change their lives, that in any case one life was as good as another and that I wasn't dissatisfied with mine here at all.

Raymond's friend Masson invites Meursault and Marie to spend the following Sunday at his beach house with him, his wife, and Raymond. Meursault's boss offers him a position in a new office he plans to open in Paris. Meursault replies that it is all the same to him, and his boss becomes angry at his lack of ambition. Meursault muses that he used to have ambition as a student, but then realized that none of it really mattered.

Marie asks Meursault if he wants to marry her. Meursault replies that it makes no difference to him. When she asks Meursault if he loves her, he again replies that though it does not mean anything, he probably does not love her. Marie thinks he is peculiar, but decides that she wants to marry him nonetheless. She tells Meursault that she cannot have dinner with him that night, and when he does not ask why she laughs. Meursault eats dinner alone at

Celeste's, where he notices a strange woman obsessively checking off radio programs listed in a magazine. He follows her briefly when she leaves.

Meursault returns home and finds Salamano waiting outside his door. Salamano says that he bought his dog in an effort to overcome the loneliness he felt after his wife died, and that he does not want to get a new dog because he is used to the old one. Salamano then expresses his condolences for the death of Madame Meursault. He mentions that some people in the neighborhood thought badly of Meursault for sending her to the home, but he himself knew that Meursault must have loved her very much. He returns to his own loss, saying that he does not know what he will do without his dog. Its loss has changed his life dramatically.

Analysis: Chapters 4–5

On the surface, Meursault appears to be an ordinary, lower middle-class French colonial in Algeria, living a typical day-to-day routine. He eats lunch in small cafés, attends films, and swims during his free time. He is diligent but not exceptional at his perfectly ordinary job. As of yet, he challenges nothing this society hands him, and it challenges nothing in him. Meursault lives his life almost unconsciously, nearly sleepwalking through a ready-made structure that his society provides him.

By attempting to assign meaning to the meaningless events of Meursault's life, the people in Meursault's social circle succumb to the same temptation that confronts us as we read *The Stranger*. Salamano, for example, states that he is sure that Meursault loved his mother deeply, despite the fact that Meursault offers no evidence to support such an assertion. Salamano is himself supplying the rational order that he desires to find in the world. His statement about Meursault's love for his mother seems intended to comfort himself more than to comfort Meursault. Further, the way Salamano turns to the subject of Meursault's love for his mother in the midst of his own discussion of his missing dog suggests that Salamano uses his discussion of Meursault and Madame Meursault to displace his own guilt. Salamano assumes that Meursault really loved his mother despite sending her to a nursing home, just as he loved his dog even though he beat it.

Raymond's encounter with the policeman implies a lack of rational order in human life. Society deems Raymond's slapping of his mistress for a perceived injustice an immoral act. But when the cop slaps Raymond, society in effect condones the action of slapping.

Physically, both slaps are nearly identical, yet one is considered wrong, and the other, just and good. Through the policeman's actions, Camus implicitly challenges the truth of society's accepted moral order.

Salamano's description of life with his dog highlights the inevitability of physical decay. Salamano says that he initially had human companionship in his wife, but she died and he had to settle for the animal companionship of his dog. As time has passed, Salamano's dog has become increasingly ugly and sick, until the point where it, too, has left him. Physical decay represents a marker and reminder of Camus's philosophy of the absurd, which asserts that humans are thrust into a life that inevitably ends in death.

Meursault narrates the events of his life as they occur without interpreting them as a coherent narrative. He does not relate the events of earlier chapters to the events that take place in these chapters. It becomes clear that Meursault concentrates largely on the moment in which he finds himself, with little reference to past occurrences or future consequences. This outlook perhaps explains his ambivalent attitude toward marriage with Marie. Because he does not think about what married life would be like, Meursault does not particularly care whether or not he and Marie marry. Characteristically, the emotional and sentimental aspects of marriage never enter into his mind.

The following Sunday, Meursault has difficulty waking up. Marie has to shake him and shout at him. He finally awakens and the two go downstairs. On the way down they call Raymond out of his room, and the three of them prepare to take a bus to Masson's beach house. As they head for the bus, they notice a group of Arabs, including Raymond's mistress's brother—whom Meursault refers to as "the Arab"—staring at them. Raymond is relieved when the Arabs do not board the bus. As the bus leaves, Meursault looks back and sees that the Arabs are still staring blankly at the same spot.

Masson's beach house is a small wooden bungalow. Meursault meets Masson's wife, and for the first time thinks about what marrying Marie will be like. Masson, Meursault, and Marie swim until lunchtime. Marie and Meursault swim in tandem, enjoying themselves greatly. After lunch, Masson, Raymond, and Meursault take a walk while the two women clean the dishes. The heat on the beach is nearly unbearable for Meursault. The three men notice two Arabs, one of whom is the brother of Raymond's mistress, following them. A fight quickly breaks out. Raymond and Masson have the advantage until Raymond's adversary produces a

knife. Meursault tries to warn Raymond, but it is too late. The Arab slashes Raymond's arm and mouth before retreating with his friend. Masson and Meursault help the wounded Raymond back to the bungalow. Marie looks very frightened, and Madame Masson cries when she sees Raymond's injuries. Masson takes Raymond to a nearby doctor. Meursault does not feel like explaining what happened, so he smokes cigarettes and watches the sea.

Raymond returns to the bungalow later that afternoon, wrapped in bandages. He descends to the beach, and, against Raymond's wishes, Meursault follows along. Raymond finds the two Arabs lying down beside a spring. Raymond has a gun in his pocket, which he fingers nervously as the two Arabs stare at him. Meursault tries to convince Raymond not to shoot, and eventually talks him into handing over the gun. The Arabs then sneak away behind a rock, so Meursault and Raymond leave.

Meursault accompanies Raymond back to the beach house. The intense heat has worn Meursault out, so the prospect of walking up the stairs to face the women seems just as tiring as continuing to walk on the hot beach. Meursault chooses to stay on the beach. The heat is oppressive and Meursault has a headache, so he walks back to the spring to cool off. When Meursault reaches the spring, he sees that the brother of Raymond's mistress has returned as well. Meursault puts his hand on the gun. When Meursault steps toward the cool water of the spring, the Arab draws his knife. The sunlight reflects off the blade and directly into Meursault's eyes, which are already stinging with sweat and heat. Meursault fires the gun once. He pauses and then fires four more times into the Arab's motionless body. Meursault has killed the Arab.

Analysis: Chapter 6

At the beginning of the novel, the indifference Meursault feels is located exclusively within himself, in his own heart and mind. By this point, however, Meursault has come to realize how similar the universe—or at least Camus's conception of it—is to his own personality. He begins to understand that not only does he not care what happens, but that the world does not care either. Reflecting on the moment when Raymond gave him the gun, Meursault says, "It was then that I realized you could either shoot or not shoot." His comment implies that no difference exists between the two alternatives.

This chapter represents the climax of the first part of the book. Since his return from his mother's funeral, everything that Meursault has done in the narrative up to this point—meeting Marie, meeting Raymond, and becoming involved in the affair with Raymond's mistress—has led him to the beach house. Yet Meursault's murder of the Arab comes as a complete surprise—nothing in *The Stranger* has prepared us for it. The feeling of abruptness that accompanies this shift in the plot is intentional on Camus's part. He wants the murder to happen unexpectedly and to strike us as bizarre.

Inevitably, the first question that the killing provokes is, "Why?" But nothing in Meursault's narrative answers this question. Camus's philosophy of absurdism emphasizes the futility of man's inevitable attempts to find order and meaning in life. The "absurd" refers to the feeling man experiences when he tries to find or fabricate order in an irrational universe. Cleverly, Camus coaxes us into just such an attempt—he lures us into trying to determine the reason for Meursault's killing of the Arab, when in fact Meursault has no reason. Camus forces us to confront the fact that any rational explanation we try to offer would be based on a consciousness that we create for Meursault, an order that we impose onto his mind.

In this chapter, we once again see the profound effect nature has on Meursault. Early in the chapter, Meursault notes nature's benefits. The sun soothes his headache, and the cool water provides an opportunity for him and Marie to swim and play happily together. Later in the chapter, however, nature becomes a negative force on Meursault. As at his mother's funeral, the heat oppresses him. Camus's language intensifies to describe the sun's harshness, particularly in the passages just before Meursault commits the murder. His prose becomes increasingly ornate, featuring such rhetorical devices as personification and metaphor, and contrasting strongly with the spare, simple descriptions that Meursault usually offers.

5 Analysis of the characters:

Meursault

Meursault is psychologically detached from the world around him. Events that would be very significant for most people, such as a marriage proposal or a parent's death, do not matter to

him, at least not on a sentimental level. He simply does not care that his mother is dead, or that Marie loves him.

Meursault is also honest, which means that he does not think of hiding his lack of feeling by shedding false tears over his mother's death. In displaying his indifference, Meursault implicitly challenges society's accepted moral standards, which dictate that one should grieve over death. Because Meursault does not grieve, society sees him as an outsider, a threat, even a monster. At his trial, the fact that he had no reaction to his mother's death damages his reputation far more than his taking of another person's life.

Meursault is neither moral nor immoral. Rather, he is amoral—he simply does not make the distinction between good and bad in his own mind. When Raymond asks him to write a letter that will help Raymond torment his mistress, Meursault indifferently agrees because he "didn't have any reason not to." He does not place any value judgment on his act, and writes the letter mainly because he has the time and the ability to do so.

At the novel's outset, Meursault's indifference seems to apply solely to his understanding of himself. Aside from his atheism, Meursault makes few assumptions about the nature of the world around him. However, his thinking begins to broaden once he is sentenced to death. After his encounter with the chaplain, Meursault concludes that the universe is, like him, totally indifferent to human life. He decides that people's lives have no grand meaning or importance, and that their actions, their comings and goings, have no effect on the world. This realization is the culmination of all the events of the novel. When Meursault accepts "the gentle indifference of the world," he finds peace with himself and with the society around him, and his development as a character is complete.

Raymond Sintes

Raymond acts as a catalyst to *The Stranger*'s plot. After Raymond beats and abuses his mistress, he comes into conflict with her brother, an Arab. Raymond draws Meursault into conflict with "the Arab," and eventually Meursault kills the Arab in cold blood. By drawing Meursault into the conflict that eventually results in Meursault's death sentence, Raymond, in a sense, causes Meursault's downfall. This responsibility on Raymond's part is symbolized by the fact that he gives Meursault the gun that Meursault later uses to kill the Arab. However, because the murder and subsequent trial bring about Meursault's realization of the

indifference of the universe, Raymond can also be seen as a catalyst of Meursault's "enlightenment."

Because Raymond's character traits contrast greatly with Meursault's, he also functions as a foil for Meursault. Whereas Meursault is simply amoral, Raymond is clearly immoral. Raymond's treatment of his mistress is violent and cruel, and he nearly kills the Arab himself before Meursault talks him out of it. Additionally, whereas Meursault passively reacts to the events around him, Raymond initiates action. He invites Meursault to dinner and to the beach, and he seeks out the Arabs after his first fight with them.

A good deal of ambiguity exists in Raymond's relationship with Meursault. On the one hand, Raymond uses Meursault. He easily convinces Meursault to help him in his schemes to punish his mistress, and to testify on his behalf at the police station. On the other hand, Raymond seems to feel some loyalty toward Meursault. He asserts Meursault's innocence at the murder trial, attributing the events leading up to the killing to "chance." It is possible that Raymond begins his relationship with Meursault intending only to use him, and then, like Marie, becomes drawn to Meursault's peculiarities.

Marie Cardona

Like Meursault, Marie delights in physical contact. She kisses Meursault frequently in public and enjoys the act of sex. However, unlike Meursault's physical affection for Marie, Marie's physical affection for Meursault signals a deeper sentimental and emotional attachment. Though Marie is disappointed when Meursault expresses his indifference toward love and marriage, she does not end the relationship or rethink her desire to marry him. In fact, Meursault's strange behavior seems part of his appeal for her. She says that she probably loves him because he is so peculiar. There also may be an element of pragmatism in Marie's decision to marry Meursault. She enjoys a good deal of freedom within the relationship because he does not take any interest in her life when they are not together.

Whatever her motivations for entering into the relationship, Marie remains loyal to Meursault when he is arrested and put on trial. In the context of Camus's absurdist philosophy, Marie's loyalty represents a mixed blessing, because her feelings of faith and hope prevent her from reaching the understanding that Meursault attains at the end of the novel. Marie never grasps the indifference of the universe, and she never comes to understand the redemptive value of

abandoning hope. Camus implies that Marie, lacking the deeper understanding of the universe that Meursault has attained, is less "enlightened" than Meursault

Meursault's Mother - Madame Meursault's death begins the action of the novel. Three years prior, Meursault sent her to an old persons' home. Meursault identifies with his mother and believes that she shared many of his attitudes about life, including a love of nature and the capacity to become accustomed to virtually any situation or occurrence. Most important, Meursault decides that, toward the end of her life, his mother must have embraced a meaningless universe and lived for the moment, just as he does.

The Chaplain - A priest who attends to the religious needs of condemned men, the chaplain acts as a catalyst for Meursault's psychological and philosophical development. After Meursault is found guilty of premeditated murder and sentenced to death, he repeatedly refuses to see the chaplain. The chaplain visits Meursault anyway, and nearly demands that he take comfort in God. The chaplain seems threatened by Meursault's stubborn atheism. Eventually, Meursault becomes enraged and angrily asserts that life is meaningless and that all men are condemned to die. This argument triggers Meursault's final acceptance of the meaninglessness of the universe.

Thomas Perez - One of the elderly residents at the old persons' home where Meursault's mother lived. Before Madame Meursault's death, she and Perez had become so inseparable that the other residents joked that he was her fiancé. Perez's relationship with Madame Meursault is one of the few genuine emotional attachments the novel depicts. Perez, as someone who expresses his love for Madame Meursault, serves as a foil the indifferent narrator.

The Examining Magistrate - The magistrate questions Meursault several times after his arrest. Deeply disturbed by Meursault's apparent lack of grief over his mother's death, the magistrate brandishes a crucifix at Meursault and demands to know whether he believes in God. When Meursault reasserts his atheism, the magistrate states that the meaning of his own life is threatened by Meursault's lack of belief. The magistrate represents society at large in that he is threatened by Meursault's unusual, amoral beliefs.

The Caretaker - A worker at the old persons' home where Meursault's mother spent the three years prior to her death. During the vigil Meursault holds before his mother's funeral, the caretaker chats with Meursault in the mortuary. They drink coffee and smoke cigarettes next to the coffin, gestures that later weigh heavily against Meursault as evidence of his monstrous indifference to his mother's death. It is peculiar that the court does not consider the caretaker's smoking and coffee drinking in the presence of the coffin to be similarly monstrous acts.

The Director - The manager of the old persons' home where Meursault's mother spent her final three years. When Meursault arrives to keep vigil before his mother's funeral, the director assures him that he should not feel guilty for having sent her to the home. However, by raising the issue, the director implies that perhaps Meursault has done something wrong. When Meursault goes on trial, the director becomes suddenly judgmental. During his testimony, he casts Meursault's actions in a negative light.

Celeste - The proprietor of a café where Meursault frequently eats lunch. Celeste remains loyal to Meursault during his murder trial. He testifies that Meursault is an honest, decent man, and he states that bad luck led Meursault to kill the Arab. Celeste's assertion that the murder had no rational cause and was simply a case of bad luck reveals a worldview similar to Meursault's.

Masson - One of Raymond's friends, who invites Raymond, Meursault, and Marie to spend a Sunday at his beach house with him and his wife. It is during this ill-fated trip to Masson's beach house that Meursault kills the Arab. Masson is a vigorous, seemingly contented figure, and he testifies to Meursault's good character during Meursault's trial.

The Prosecutor - The lawyer who argues against Meursault at the trial. During his closing arguments, the prosecutor characterizes Meursault as a cool, calculating monster, using Meursault's lack of an emotional attachment to his mother as his primary evidence. He demands the death penalty for Meursault, arguing that Meursault's moral indifference threatens all of society and therefore must be stamped out.

Salamano - One of Meursault's neighbors. Salamano owns an old dog that suffers from mange, and he frequently curses at and beats his pet. However, after Salamano loses his dog, he weeps and longs for its return. His strong grief over losing his dog contrasts with Meursault's indifference at losing his mother.

The Arab - The brother of Raymond's mistress. On the Sunday that Raymond, Meursault, and Marie spend at Masson's beach house, Meursault kills the Arab with Raymond's gun. The crime is apparently motiveless—the Arab has done nothing to Meursault. The Arab's mysteriousness as a character makes Meursault's crime all the more strange and difficult to understand.

6 Theme of the text:

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

The Irrationality of the Universe

Though *The Stranger* is a work of fiction, it contains a strong resonance of Camus's philosophical notion of absurdity. In his essays, Camus asserts that individual lives and human existence in general have no rational meaning or order. However, because people have difficulty accepting this notion, they constantly attempt to identify or create rational structure and meaning in their lives. The term "absurdity" describes humanity's futile attempt to find rational order where none exists.

Though Camus does not explicitly refer to the notion of absurdity in *The Stranger*, the tenets of absurdity operate within the novel. Neither the external world in which Meursault lives nor the internal world of his thoughts and attitudes possesses any rational order. Meursault has no discernable reason for his actions, such as his decision to marry Marie and his decision to kill the Arab.

Society nonetheless attempts to fabricate or impose rational explanations for Meursault's irrational actions. The idea that things sometimes happen for no reason, and that events sometimes have no meaning is disruptive and threatening to society. The trial sequence in Part Two of the novel represents society's attempt to manufacture rational order. The

prosecutor and Meursault's lawyer both offer explanations for Meursault's crime that are based on logic, reason, and the concept of cause and effect. Yet these explanations have no basis in fact and serve only as attempts to defuse the frightening idea that the universe is irrational. The entire trial is therefore an example of absurdity—an instance of humankind's futile attempt to impose rationality on an irrational universe.

The Meaninglessness of Human Life

A second major component of Camus's absurdist philosophy is the idea that human life has no redeeming meaning or purpose. Camus argues that the only certain thing in life is the inevitability of death, and, because all humans will eventually meet death, all lives are all equally meaningless. Meursault gradually moves toward this realization throughout the novel, but he does not fully grasp it until after his argument with the chaplain in the final chapter. Meursault realizes that, just as he is indifferent to much of the universe, so is the universe indifferent to him. Like all people, Meursault has been born, will die, and will have no further importance.

Paradoxically, only after Meursault reaches this seemingly dismal realization is he able to attain happiness. When he fully comes to terms with the inevitability of death, he understands that it does not matter whether he dies by execution or lives to die a natural death at an old age. This understanding enables Meursault to put aside his fantasies of escaping execution by filing a successful legal appeal. He realizes that these illusory hopes, which had previously preoccupied his mind, would do little more than create in him a false sense that death is avoidable. Meursault sees that his hope for sustained life has been a burden. His liberation from this false hope means he is free to live life for what it is, and to make the most of his remaining days.

The Importance of the Physical World

The Stranger shows Meursault to be interested far more in the physical aspects of the world around him than in its social or emotional aspects. This focus on the sensate world results from the novel's assertion that there exists no higher meaning or order to human life. Throughout *The Stranger*, Meursault's attention centers on his own body, on his physical relationship with Marie, on the weather, and on other physical elements of his surroundings. For example, the heat during the funeral procession causes Meursault far more pain than the

thought of burying his mother. The sun on the beach torments Meursault, and during his trial Meursault even identifies his suffering under the sun as the reason he killed the Arab. The style of Meursault's narration also reflects his interest in the physical. Though he offers terse, plain descriptions when glossing over emotional or social situations, his descriptions become vivid and ornate when he discusses topics such as nature and the weather.

Motifs

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, or literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes.

Decay and Death

The different characters in *The Stranger* hold widely varying attitudes toward decay and death. Salamano loves his decaying, scab-covered dog and he values its companionship, even though most people find it disgusting. Meursault does not show much emotion in response to his mother's death, but the society in which he lives believes that he should be distraught with grief. Additionally, whereas Meursault is content to believe that physical death represents the complete and final end of life, the chaplain holds fast to the idea of an afterlife.

An essential part of Meursault's character development in the novel is his coming to terms with his own attitudes about death. At the end of the novel, he has finally embraced the idea that death is the one inevitable fact of human life, and is able to accept the reality of his impending execution without despair.

Watching and Observation

Throughout the novel there are instances of characters watching Meursault, or of his watching them. This motif recalls several components of Camus's absurdist philosophy. The constant watching in *The Stranger* suggests humanity's endless search for purpose, and emphasizes the importance of the tangible, visible details of the physical world in a universe where there is no grander meaning.

When Meursault watches people on the street from his balcony, he does so passively, absorbing details but not judging what he sees. By contrast, the people in the courtroom watch Meursault as part of the process of judgment and condemnation. In the courtroom, we

learn that many of Meursault's previous actions were being watched without his—or our—knowledge. The Arabs watch Raymond and his friends with implicit antagonism as they walk to the bus. Raymond's neighbors act as spectators to his dispute with his mistress and the police officer, watching with concern or petty curiosity. At times, watching is a mysterious activity, such as when Meursault watches the woman at Celeste's, and later when she watches him in court. The novel's moments of watching and observation reflect humanity's endless search for meaning, which Camus found absurd.

Symbols

Symbols are objects, characters, figures, or colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

The Courtroom

In the courtroom drama that comprises the second half of *The Stranger*, the court symbolizes society as a whole. The law functions as the will of the people, and the jury sits in judgment on behalf of the entire community. In *The Stranger*, Camus strengthens this court-as-society symbolism by having nearly every one of the minor characters from the first half of the novel reappear as a witness in the courtroom. Also, the court's attempts to construct a logical explanation for Meursault's crime symbolize humanity's attempts to find rational explanations for the irrational events of the universe. These attempts, which Camus believed futile, exemplify the absurdity Camus outlined in his philosophy.

The Crucifix

The crucifix that the examining magistrate waves at Meursault symbolizes Christianity, which stands in opposition to Camus's absurdist world view. Whereas absurdism is based on the idea that human life is irrational and purposeless, Christianity conceives of a rational order for the universe based on God's creation and direction of the world, and it invests human life with higher metaphysical meaning.

The crucifix also symbolizes rational belief structures in general. The chaplain's insistence that Meursault turn to God does not necessarily represent a desire that Meursault accept specifically Christian beliefs so much as a desire that he embrace the principle of a meaningful universe in general. When Meursault defies the magistrate by rejecting

Christianity, he implicitly rejects all systems that seek to define a rational order within human existence. This defiance causes Meursault to be branded a threat to social order.

7 Important Quotations Explained

Maman died today. Or yesterday maybe, I don't know. I got a telegram from the home: "Mother deceased. Funeral tomorrow. Faithfully yours." That doesn't mean anything. Maybe it was yesterday.

Spoken by Meursault, the novel's narrator and protagonist, these are the opening lines of the novel. They introduce Meursault's emotional indifference, one his most important character traits. Meursault does not express any remorse upon learning of his mother's death—he merely reports the fact in a plain and straightforward manner. His chief concern is the precise day of his mother's death—a seemingly trivial detail.

Mersault's comment, "That doesn't mean anything," has at least two possible meanings. It could be taken as part of his discussion about which day Madame Meursault died. That is, Meursault could mean that the telegram does not reveal any meaningful information about the date of his mother's death. However, the comment could also be read more broadly, with a significance that perhaps Meursault does not consciously intend; Meursault might be implying that it does not matter that his mother died at all. This possible reading introduces the idea of the meaninglessness of human existence, a theme that resounds throughout the novel.

2.
She said, "If you go slowly, you risk getting sunstroke. But if you go too fast, you work up a sweat and then catch a chill inside the church." She was right. There was no way out.

The nurse speaks these words to Meursault during the long, hot funeral procession in Part One, Chapter 1. On a literal level, the nurse's words describe the dilemma the weather presents: the heat's influence is inescapable. But Meursault's comment, "There was no way out," broadens the implications of the nurse's words. As Meursault eventually realizes, the nurse's words describe the human condition: man is born into a life that can only end in death. Death, like the harsh effects of the sun, is unavoidable. This idea is central to Camus's philosophy in *The Stranger*, which posits death as the one central, inescapable fact of life.

3.

A minute later she asked me if I loved her. I told her it didn't mean anything but that I didn't think so.

In this passage from Part One, Chapter 4, Meursault relates an exchange he has with Marie. With characteristic emotional indifference and detachment, Meursault answers Marie's question completely and honestly. Always blunt, he never alters what he says to be tactful or to conform to societal expectations. However, Meursault's honesty reflects his ignorance. His blunt words suggest that he does not understand fully the emotional stakes in Marie's question. Also, in Meursault's assertion that love "didn't mean anything," we see an early form of a central idea Meursault later comes to understand—the meaninglessness of human life.

4.

I said that people never change their lives, that in any case one life was as good as another and that I wasn't dissatisfied with mine here at all.

This quotation is Meursault's response in Part One, Chapter 5, to his boss's offer of a position in Paris. Meursault's statement shows his belief in a certain rigidity or inertia to human existence. His comment that "one life was as good as another" maintains that although details may change, one's life remains essentially constant. The comment also implies that each person's life is essentially equal to everyone else's.

At this point in the novel, Meursault offers no explanation for his belief in the equality of human lives. In the novel's final chapter, he identifies death as the force responsible for the constant and unchangeable nature of human life. A comparison of this quotation to Meursault's ideas following his death sentence highlights Meursault's development as a character whose understanding of the human condition deepens as a result of his experiences.

5.

As if that blind rage had washed me clean, rid me of hope; for the first time, in that night alive with signs and stars, I opened myself to the gentle indifference of the world. Finding it so much like myself—so like a brother, really—I felt that I had been happy and that I was happy again. For everything to be consummated, for me to feel less alone, I had only to wish

that there be a large crowd of spectators the day of my execution and that they greet me with cries of hate.

These are the last lines of the novel. After his meeting with the chaplain, whose insistence that Meursault turn to God in the wake of his death sentence puts Meursault into a "blind rage," Meursault fully accepts the absurdist idea that the universe is indifferent to human affairs and that life lacks rational order and meaning. He moves toward this revelation through the course of the novel, but does not fully grasp it until he accepts the impossibility of avoiding his death. Meursault realizes that the universe's indifference to human affairs echoes his own personal indifference to human affairs, and the similarity evokes a feeling of companionship in him that leads him to label the world "a brother."

As opposed to earlier in the novel, when Meursault was passively content at best, here Meursault finds that he is actively happy once he opens himself to the reality of human existence. Meursault finds that he is also happy with his position in society. He does not mind being a loathed criminal. He only wishes for companionship, "to feel less alone." He accepts that this companionship will take the form of an angry mob on his execution day. He sees his impending execution as the "consummation" of his new understanding.

7 Questions for Practice

How do we know the world of *The Stranger* is irrational? How do different characters react to this irrationality?

Camus demonstrates that the world of *The Stranger* is irrational by excluding from the text any logical explanation for the events of the novel. Meursault's murder of the Arab is the most obvious example of an event that occurs for no apparent reason. Meursault has no reason to kill the Arab, nor does he construct one. His action is completely random and purposeless. Another occurrence that holds no rational meaning is Thomas Perez's exhaustion at the funeral. Perez, possibly the only person who really cares about Madame Meursault's death, ironically cannot move quickly enough to stay with her coffin. His inability to keep up with the funeral procession—to act in accordance with his feelings—frustrates him to the point of tears. A third inexplicable occurrence is the scheduling of Meursault's trial just before the trial of a son who killed his father. The prosecutor argues that Meursault's crime opened the door for the crime of parricide, using the random circumstance

of the trial schedule to help secure Meursault's death sentence. Had the two cases not been scheduled back-to-back, Meursault might have received a lighter sentence. Camus seems to use the extent to which each character accepts or attempts to defy the irrationality of the universe as a signal of his or her personal worth.

How do Meursault's and Marie's views of their relationship differ?

Meursault's continual focus on Marie's body and his lack of interest in her personality show that he sees his relationship with her as purely physical. Meursault repeatedly makes comments about Marie's figure, usually noting how beautiful she looks. He describes little about their interaction other than their physical contact. The emotional aspects of their relationship are clearly secondary to Meursault. When she asks, he tells Marie that he probably does not love her, and he answers her questions about marriage with similar indifference. The fact that Marie asks these questions shows that she feels at least some emotional attachment to Meursault. At one point, she explicitly states that she loves Meursault for his peculiarities. After Meursault goes to jail, the differences between his and Marie's attitudes about their relationship become even more obvious. Whereas Marie visits Meursault and genuinely misses his companionship, Meursault only misses Marie because he misses sex. Otherwise, he hardly thinks of her.

3.

Compare Meursault to Raymond Sintes. How are the two neighbors different? How are they similar?

At first, it seems that Raymond and Meursault could not be more different. Whereas Raymond is active and possesses a violent temper, Meursault is passive and always calm. Raymond treats his mistress cruelly, beating and abusing her, while Meursault does not seem capable of such behavior toward women. However, Raymond holds genuine feelings for his mistress and is truly hurt when he learns that she is cheating on him. Meursault, on the contrary, seems to have very little affection for Marie, whose appeal to him is predominantly physical.

Despite their differences, Meursault and Raymond hold similar positions in relation to society. Meursault's detached attitudes make him an outsider, a stranger to "normal" society.

Raymond's work as a pimp brings him a similar societal stigma. Like Meursault, Raymond is on the outside of society looking in. Perhaps this similarity forms the foundation of their friendship.

1. Trace the development of Meursault's philosophy. How does he come to open himself to "the gentle indifference of the world"? What spurs his revelation? How do earlier events in the novel prepare us to expect it?

2. We see characters in the book solely through Meursault's eyes, but Meursault typically tells us very little. Using the information that Meursault provides, analyze a character such as Marie and Raymond. What level of insight does Meursault provide into these characters' personalities?

3. Compare and contrast the relationship between Salamano and his dog with the relationship between Meursault and his mother. What are the similarities? Which is more loving?

4. Discuss the style of *The Stranger*. How does Meursault's language correspond to the subjects he describes? Does it evolve or change as the novel goes on? Does the stripped-down prose of the novel's first half limit its expressive power?

5. Is Meursault really a threat to his society? Does he deserve the death penalty? Is he more or less dangerous than a criminal who commits a crime with clear motive?

6. In his jail cell, Meursault finds an old newspaper article about a Czechoslovakian man who is murdered by his mother and sister. How does this article relate to Meursault's own trial for murder? How does this article expand the themes in *The Stranger*? How does it support Camus's philosophy of the absurd?

7. Analyze the passages describing Meursault's walk down the beach before he kills the Arab. How does Camus build tension in the passage? How is it different from the passages preceding it? Meursault says at his trial that he killed the Arab because of the sun. Is this explanation at all valid?