The Lower Depths Study Guide

The Lower Depths by Maxim Gorky

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

*The Lower Depth*s is Maxim Gorki's best known play, widely considered both a masterpiece and an extremely problematic work. Subtitled *Scenes from Russian Life,* the play was a huge success from its first performance. The idea for the play was conceived in 1900, and it was written during the winter of 1901 and the spring of 1902. It was produced by the Moscow Arts Theatre on December 18, 1902. Konstantin Stanislavsky directed the play and starred in it as Sahtin, and as it was one of his earliest successes, it became a hallmark of his work, the Moscow Arts Theatre, and Russian socialist realism. The play is a portrait, without much overriding plot, of a destitute, lower-class group in a lodging house in Volga. Realistic depiction of this segment of Russian society was new and avant-garde at the turn of the century, in contrast to the age-old trend towards romanticizing the underclasses. Some critics at the time took issue with Gorki's subject matter, and his pessimistic, unredemptive presentation of the lower depths. Others disliked the ambiguity of the moral message about the human condition, and the unconventional structure of conversation around this. Most agreed, however, that the play's character sketches were powerful and moving, and the subject matter, at the very least, provocative. Debate over its chief theme, the merits of the "truth" versus the "consoling lie," continues to engage audiences and scholars today, and it continues to be produced worldwide a century after its inception.

Author Biography

Maxim Gorki was born Alexei Maximovich Peshkov in Nizhy Novgorod, Russia, on March 16,1868. His father died when Maxim was five years old, and he was raised by his maternal grandparents. His childhood was a brutal one; he was abused by his grandfather and forced to earn his own living from the age of eight. While he was still a child, Gorki became a menial laborer and a tramp, experiences that informed the works for which he is most famous. He was frequently beaten and abused by his employers, and to escape the miserable conditions of his life, he became an avid reader. In this way Gorki was self-educated, and came to see literature as a means of salvation for all people, as he details in his autobiographies and the essay collection, *On Literature.*

Gorki spent his early adulthood in Kazan, where, at 19, he attempted suicide by shooting himself in the chest. The event transformed the young man, and motivated him to begin his career as a writer. By 1892 he had published his first piece under his pseudonym, meaning Maxim the Bitter. His first major work, *Chelkash,* commenced his rise to recognition. In 1902 *The Lower Depths* was produced to enormous acclaim. The play was performed worldwide and established Gorki both at home and in the West.

Throughout this period Gorki was viewed with suspicion by Russian authorities, who saw his work as contributing to growing social unrest. He was briefly imprisoned in 1901 on account of his revolutionary poem, "*Pesnya o Burevestnike,*" and the following year his election to the Russian Academy of Sciences was rescinded. Gorki was active in the 1905 revolution, and after its defeat lived in exile, mostly in Capri. Mark Twain, who supported American intervention on behalf of the revolution, hosted him for a short period in the United States. When Gorki returned to Russia in 1913, he continued his political activities and supported the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, although he disapproved of many of the new regime's unethical tactics.

During the early post-revolution years, on behalf of many intellectuals and in the interest of preserving works of art, Gorki complied with Lenin' s demands that he cease speaking out against the new regime. After the revolution he returned to Capri, where he wrote his autobiographical trilogy: *Detstvo (My Childhood), Vlyudyakh (In the World), and Mao universitety (My Universities).* He entered a period of compliance with the new Soviet government, and, as Russia's foremost living writer, was used to promote Soviet views. He died on June 14, 1936, under suspicious circumstances amid speculation that he was assassinated.

Although Gorki has consistently received mixed criticism, his work marks the innovation of socialist realism and reflects tremendous advocacy on the part of Russia's oppressed people. While his work is compromised by adherence to ideology and an overly didactic tone, his sensitivity to character and environment are moving and powerful. The conflicting forces in his life, the socio-political movements in Russia with his emotional sensitivity to the plight of mankind, determine his work and make him very much a man of his time.

Plot Summary

Act I

The Lower Depths opens in a cavernous, underground lodging house. Kvaschnya, the Baron, Bubnoff and Kleshtch argue about whether or not Kvaschnya will marry again. In the course of the conversation, the Baron mocks Nastiah, who is engrossed in her romance novel. Meanwhile, Anna moans from bed about the noise and her ailment. Kvaschnya urges her to eat while her husband, Kleshtch, ignores her.

Sahtin rises and a conversation ensues over who will sweep the floor. The Actor claims he is too debilitated by alcohol poisoning to do it. In the course of what turns into an argument, the audience learns about Sahtin's former education, the Actor's flair for drama, and Bubnoff s past career as a faker of furs. Nobody sweeps the floor, and the Actor takes Anna outside for some air. All the while Kleshtch works away at an old lock.

Kostilioff comes downstairs in search of his wife, Wassilissa. Wordplay is exchanged between Kostiloff and several others over his status as a slumlord, and he appears to feign a Christian attitude. He wakes Pepel and they discuss money in a conversation revealing that they barter for stolen goods, even though Kostilioff professes innocence throughout. Shortly afterward, Natasha escorts in Luka, who is carrying a staff, a sack and a kettle. His role in the play is made immediately clear, as he declares he sees all men as equal and will be glad to sleep anywhere. Natasha urges Kleshtch and the others to have compassion for Anna as she approaches death. After she leaves, the men speculate on her, and Pepel's interest in her is revealed.

Luka begins to sing a song about how no path can be found in darkness. The song leads to a discussion about despair, and Luka restates his conviction that all men are equal. Alyoshka enters the scene drunk, carrying an accordian, and proceeds giddily to ramble on about caring about nothing. Wassilissa enters and berates him for spreading rumors about her. She tries to kick him out but he darts around, teasing her. When Luka laughs, Wassilissa turns on him, asking for his passport and calling him a vagabond. Bubnoff tells her that Pepel is not around and she bristles at the suggestion that she has any motives besides keeping order. As she leaves she demands the floor be swept, and Bubnoff and Nastiah explain that she is bitter because Pepel no longer loves her. Luka concedes to sweep the floor. Nastiah explains that Wassilissa is angry with Alyoshka for spreading rumors that Pepel is finished with her. She mentions her own misery and feelings of superfluousness, and Bubnoff says that all people are superfluous.

Medviedeff enters and introduces himself to Luka, and Luka lightly mocks him, reinforcing the impression that he tests authority. Medviedeff describes dealing with the drunken Alyoshka and the rumors he is spreading about his niece, Wassilissa, but nobody explains the situation to him. Kvaschnya enters and flirts with the policeman, but again says she will never remarry. Anna feebly makes her way back in, and when others joke about it, Luka wonders at how they can treat another human so. Medviedeff

misinterprets him and points out that if she dies it will be legal trouble for all. There is noise from above as Wassilissa beats Natasha, and, as the others move to intervene, Anna and Luka make acquaintance.

Act II

It is evening in the same scene, and Sahtin, the Baron, Krivoi Zoba and the Tartar are playing cards while Kleshtch and the Actor watch. Bubnoff and Medviedeff play partidame, while Luka tends to Anna. Bubnoff and Krivoi Zoba sing a song about life as a prison while Anna moans about her life and Luka ministers to her. Luka comforts Anna with promises of peace and salvation while the players sing and argue, the Tartar advocating fair play. When the Actor bemoans his alcoholism, Luka tells him there is a clinic where he can be cured, although he cannot tell him where.

Pepel enters and asks Medviedeff about Natasha's condition, revealing his interest in her. They argue, and Pepel threatens to report the family for buying stolen goods. Medviedeff storms out and Luka urges Pepel to run away to Siberia with Natasha. Pepel accuses Luka of lying to give people hope. Luka responds that people believe what they need to believe.

Wassilissa enters to see Pepel, under the guise of seeing Anna. Luka conceals himself above the stove. Pepel makes clear he does not love Wassilissa. She offers to help him leave with Natasha if he will arrange to have her husband killed and free her from her life. Pepel refuses. Kostilioff enters and alternates between feigning courtesy and screeching hysterically. Kostilioff shakes Pepel by the collar, but is interrupted by noise that Luka makes from his hiding place. Kostilioff and Wassilissa leave. Luka emerges and explains that he didn't want Pepel to lose his head and kill Kostilioff. He warns Pepel away from Wassilissa and urges him to flee with Natasha. Their conversation is interrupted by Anna's death rattle, and they leave to find Kleshtch. The Actor enters and, newly inspired, recites a poem. Natasha enters and discovers Anna dead. The players enter and make callous remarks about the death. Kleshtch worries about funeral costs and the Actor seeks Luka for more advice. Sahtin argues that Luka's advice is a hoax and declares that the dead neither hear nor feel.

Act III

Nastiah and Natasha sit in a vacant lot with Luka, the Baron and Kleshtch. Bubnoff looks out from a window in the house. Nastiah tells the story of her lost love, but the Baron interrupts her because of her shifting account of the lover's name. She gets upset, and Luka defends her right to some consideration while Natasha comforts her. Luka says he believes her, which opens a conversation on the merits of lying to oneself. Natasha admits to dreaming of being rescued. When Natasha tells Luka he is a good man, he tells a story of human potential, about two thieves he befriended after they tried to rob him. Kleshtch bursts out that his version of the truth is his terrible circumstance, and says he hates everyone.

Pepel enters and they continue the discussion about truth. Luka tells a story about a man who believed in a land of justice, but when he learned it did not exist he killed himself. Then Luka reports he intends to leave, and this provokes Pepel to declare his love for Natasha and ask her to leave with him. Wassilissa appears and overhears the conversation as Luka encourages the union. Kostilioff appears and berates Natasha for neglecting duties as Wassilissa makes a sinister promise of a wedding. Kostilioff warns Luka that he will set Medviedeff on him if he doesn't leave.

Luka says he will leave that night. Sahtin and the Actor enter, arguing about the rumored clinic. Luka questions Sahtin's motives in weakening the Actor's resolve, and Sahtin reports that prison changed him from a jolly man into the realist he is now. Their conversation about Sahtin's former life is interrupted by noise of Natasha being brutally beaten. The Actor runs to fetch Pepel. As the beating continues audibly, the Tartar and Krivoi Zoba enter, followed by Medviedeff, who is trying to retrieve his whistle from Alyoshka. Natasha enters, aided by Nastiah, with Wassilissa and Kostilioff in pursuit. Pepel bursts in and strikes Kostilioff, accidentally killing him. Natasha, hearing the commotion, accuses Pepel and Wassilissa of planning it all and conspiring to kill Kostilioff.

Act IV

The scene is an approximate recreation of the first. Kleshtch tinkers with an accordian and he, the Baron, Nastiah and Sahtin discuss Luka. The Tartar says he followed the law of his heart. Nastiah says she loved him and that she is disgusted with her companions. The Actor makes oblique reference to leaving forever. The Baron calls Luka a fool and a charlatan. Sahtin delivers monologues in which he appreciates Luka's motives for his lies, but advocates the truth as the inheritance of free men.

Nastiah reveals that Natasha has left town and that Pepel and Wassilissa are in prison. Nastiah continues to provoke the Baron and insult everyone, then leaves. Sahtin delivers a speech on the glory of man's potential. The Baron goes in search of Nastiah. The Actor takes a drink and rushes out. Medviedeff and Bubnoff enter with whiskey, followed by Alyoshka. It is revealed that he and Kvaschnya have married and now run the lodging house. Kvaschnya enters and confronts Alyoshka for spreading rumors that she beats her husband. Bubnoff and Krivoi Zoba begin their song about life as a prison, and the Baron and Nastiah burst in with news that the Actor has killed himself.

Act 1

Act 1 Summary

The opening set is a cave-like stone cellar with low, grimy ceilings, peeling paint and plaster, and a single window, high up on the right wall. Thin boards, curtains, and an arrangement of beds and bunks variously separate the large space into "rooms" assigned to the boarders of this place, which is the rooming house run by Mikhail Ivanoff Kostilyoff and his wife Vassilisa Karpovna. In one corner stands a large Russian stove, and in the center of the room are a large, dirty, unpainted wooden table and a pair of benches. Though it is an early spring morning, the room is dark, gloomy and resembles nothing so much as a dank prison cell. Coughing and grunting sounds emanate from behind the curtains and above the stove.

From the samovar behind the table, Kvashnya, a vendor of baked meat pies, loudly proclaims that not for a hundred baked lobsters would she marry again. Andrei Mitritch Kleshtch, a locksmith trying in vain to repair a stubborn lock, scoffs that she will end up married to Abramka Miedviedieff, the policeman and the uncle of Vassilisa. Bubnoff the capmaker works at his bunk.

The Baron reaches over and snatches a book away from Nastya, the streetwalker, who has been reading quietly on the stool, and begins loudly ridiculing her for wasting her time on romance novels, taunting her and waving the book over her head while she grasps for it. The commotion disturbs Anna Kleshtch, whose lifelong suffering at the hands of her abusive husband has left her dying a slow and painful death. Kvashnya offers Anna food, and then heads off to market her wares. Anna offers the food to her husband, Kleshtch.

Satine, who has been lying on his bunk grunting, sits up and wonders aloud who beat him up the previous day. Kleshtch tells the Actor, lying above the stove, that it is his turn to sweep the floor. The Actor argues that in fact it is the Baron's turn, and that in any case he is too ill—his organism is poisoned with alcohol, he says—to be able to do so. Satine regales his listeners with the apparently familiar story of his past education and love of words, which Bubnoff dismisses as superficial, and something that will "all come off in the end," like the dye he used to make fake furs in his past. The Actor bemoans his wasted career, saying that talent is nothing but faith in oneself. When Anna has a coughing fit and has trouble breathing, he takes her out for some air, all the while complaining about the state of his own health.

Kostilyoff enters, looking for his wife. He jokes with the Actor about Christian kindliness even as he is exhibiting his own miserly ways by complaining about how much space Kleshtch takes up for his two rubles a month, and reminding the Actor that he must repay his debts in this life, not the afterlife. Kostilyoff wakes Vaska Pepel, the young thief with whom he deals in stolen goods, though he denies as much in front of the boarders. Pepel demands his money. When Kostilyoff storms off, Pepel asks the others

why the landlord bothered to come by, and they laugh, telling him that of course Kostilyoff was looking for Vassilisa, thinking he would catch her in bed with Pepel. Satine says Pepel should get rid of Kostilyoff, marry Vassilisa and become the kindly landlord, to which Pepel replies that they can all go to hell—including Vassilisa, his mistress. Pepel and Bubnoff discuss honor and conscience with Kleshtch. They are of the opinion that these things are only for the rich. Pepel does not believe that it is to anyone's advantage to have a conscience.

Natasha, Vassilisa's younger sister, enters with Luka, an old man carrying a stick, a bundle, a kettle and a teapot, clearly a vagabond. He introduces himself by saying, "How are you, honest folks?" Natasha asks everyone, especially Kleshtch, to be kinder to Anna in her final days. When she takes Luka into the kitchen, the men talk about her, and it is clear that Pepel has developed an interest in her.

The Baron, Bubnoff, Pepel and Luka discuss man and class distinctions as, simply for amusement, Pepel wonders if he can convince the Baron to get on all fours and bark like a dog. Luka repeats an earlier theme of his when he says, "We're all human beings. Pretend if you want to, put on airs if you wish, but man you were born, and man you must die." The others ask if he has a passport, prompting Luka to ask if the Baron is a policeman. The uncomfortable moment passes and the group is interrupted when Alyoshka the shoemaker comes in playing the concertina, whistling and speaking loudly in a drunken manner. Vassilisa come in and tries to kick Alyoshka out, and when Luka laughs at her, she turns on him, calling him a tramp. She, too, asks about his passport. Luka says she is "not very kindly."

Bubnoff, noting that Vassilisa is looking all around, comments to her that Pepel is not at home, and she reacts by demanding to know why the floors have not been swept. She exits in a rage. Luka sweeps the floor as Nastya tells him that Vassilisa is in a foul mood because she is angry with Alyoshka for saying that Pepel loves Natasha, not Vassilisa. Nastya says she feels unwanted, and plans to find another lodging-house. Bubnoff calmly says that she is not wanted anywhere—that all people on earth are superfluous.

Miedviedieff comes in and introduces himself to Luka, then tries to get Bubnoff to tell him what Alyoshka knows about Pepel and his niece Vassilisa, although clearly he has heard the rumors himself. Kvashnya comes in and once more announces that she will not be remarrying, least of all to Miedviedieff. Luka finds Anna moaning and clinging to a wall in the hallway, and takes her to her bunk, chiding Kvashnya for ignoring the old woman. Kvashnya shrugs it off with a joke, and when Luka asks, how they can neglect another human being, Miedviedieff appears to agree, misunderstanding him, as he is thinking really of all the bother that would come along with a premature death. From above comes the sound of violence as Vassilisa and Natasha fight, and Kostilyoff bursts in to fetch the policeman, saying that his wife is killing Natasha. Anna and Luka talk quietly about the fight, and Anna says Luka is soft and gentle as her father was. He responds by saying that "they" pounded him until he got soft.

Act 1 Analysis

At the time Maxim Gorky wrote *The Lower Depths*, in 1902, he was deeply involved in the socialist revolutionary political movements of the day, and is in fact known today as the founder of Socialist Realism. His own definition of that artistic doctrine, essentially a celebration of the *lumpenproletariat*, was this: "Being as action, as creation aimed at the unbroken development of the finest individual traits of man, that he may triumph over the forces of nature, that he may realize the joy of living on earth, which by his ever-increasing requirements he is induced to transform into a splendid place for all mankind united into a single family." Recognizing that Gorky fully embraced this sympathetic and hopeful view of mankind is crucial to understanding the heart of what seems at first a bleak, damning and heartless story.

In this first act, we meet all the characters of importance—one of which is the setting. Gorky's boarding house deliberately invokes the image of a prison, with its bunks, stonewalls, assigned spaces and communal living. (Gorky was himself in exile, having been arrested after signing a letter of political protest, when he wrote the play.) People come and go, but are never gone for long. The implication is that each of these characters has been locked into place through the circumstances of their lives, imprisoned by their own inertia. We meet Nastya, who sells her body on the streets but reads romance novels and dreams of true love. We meet Kleshtch, who has beaten his wife so badly for years that she now lies dying just a few feet away behind a curtain. Yet in a kind of metaphor for the countless workingmen who never seem to get ahead, he occupies his time working fruitlessly on a single padlock as though fixing it will bring some kind of release. We meet the Actor, who no longer performs, the Baron, who no longer owns any property, and Satine, the well-educated mystery man who no longer needs his fancy vocabulary.

The only people, it seems, who are moving at all, are those engaged in petty crimes and melodrama; even they are really going nowhere: Pepel the thief, who is also engaged in a sexual liaison with the landlord's wife; Kostilyoff the landlord, the outwardly religious black marketer who terrorizes everyone; Vassilisa the adulteress, who beats her sister mercilessly; and Natasha the younger sister, who wants only to live in peace, yet can't escape the wrath of her sister or the attentions of Pepel.

Into the mix comes Luka, the old tramp, sounding very much like Gorky himself in many ways with his talk of equality, his questioning of authority, and even his admission to Anna that he was beaten regularly as a child, as was Gorky himself. As a vagabond, a traveler, Luka is by definition someone who is moving from one place to another. Though we know little or nothing about his past, we do know that he is free to come and go as he pleases, and that he does not even bother with such trivialities as passports or papers.

Act 2

Act 2 Summary

Act II opens in the same room. Satine, the Baron, porters Krivoy Zob and the Tartar are playing cards while Kleshtch and the Actor look on. Bubnoff and Miedviedieff play checkers, and Luka sits talking quietly with Anna. Zob is singing a song about prison life, and longing to be free, while Luka is telling Anna that after she dies she will suffer no more. The Tartar catches the Baron cheating, and demands that the two play honestly; Satine asks, What for?

The Actor tells Luka how he has ruined his life by "poisoning his organism with alcohol" such that he can no longer recall any of the fine verses that used to earn him such thunderous applause on the stage. Luka tells him that a man's very soul is the thing he loves, and that there is a hospital for drunkards where a man can be treated for nothing, where they believe that even a drunkard is a human being. When the Actor asks Luka where the hospital is, Luka puts him off, telling him to get ready, that he will tell him the name in time, and that in the meantime the Actor should prepare himself, stop drinking so much, bear up. The Actor smiles, laughs and exits happily.

Kleshtch stands near where Anna and Luka are talking as though he has something important to tell his wife, but says nothing, and leaves. Luka comments that Kleshtch seems pained by Anna's condition, but she dismisses the idea, reminding Luka that he caused it. She wants Luka to keep talking to her, and he promises her that Death will wipe out everything, that death is kindly, and there is nothing to fear. Pepel, overhearing, tells Luka he respects him for telling pleasant lies to make people feel better. However, when Luka tells Pepel that he ought to take Natasha and run off to Siberia, where life is good and he can start over without being known as a thief, Pepel asks why Luka has to lie about everything. He asks if there is a God. Luka responds cryptically: "If you have faith, there is; if you haven't, there isn't…whatever you believe in, exists." Pepel clearly wants to continue the conversation, but Luka is back to tending Anna until Vassilisa demands that he leave. He pretends to by climbing on top of the stove.

Vassilisa confronts Pepel, asking him if he loves her. When he admits that he never has, she becomes businesslike and presents him with a proposal: money and her sister in exchange for him, or one of his friends, doing away with her husband Kostilyoff. Pepel is disgusted with her. The mercurial Kostilyoff enters and is at first angrily triumphant that at last he seems to have caught the two of them alone together and confirmed his suspicions, then passively repentant that he has called her horrid names, and then violently abusive as he orders her to go home and fill the lamps. Pepel watches all this, then orders him out. Kostilyoff, angry at being ordered out of his own place, yells back, and Pepel seizes him by the collar, shaking him violently. Before Pepel can cause any real harm, however, Luka make a loud noise from his hiding place on the stove, Pepel releases Kostilyoff, and he runs off. Luka admits that he did not want Pepel to be carried

away and accidentally be caught up in Vassilisa's sordid plan. Pepel is confused by his kindness but grateful.

Luka checks on Anna and finds she has died. He and Pepel go to notify Kleshtch. The Actor enters, looking for Luka, slightly drunk but happy that he has at last remembered some lines of verse. He recites them loudly, to Natasha's amusement. He tells her he is leaving in search of a cure, and that she should, too. Natasha sees that Anna is dead, remarking that she is probably the better off for it. She wonders why no one has even one kind word for Anna—everyone seems concerned only about the expense, the bother, the smell and the fact that it will now be much quieter for sleeping.

The Actor, still looking for Luka to recite his verses and to find out at last the name of the town, runs instead into Satine, who tells him that Luka has made the whole thing up, that there is no such hospital for drunkards, no such town to go to for a cure. The Actor still clings to the hope, saying that Satine is lying. When the others complain they are making too much noise, Satine shouts that the dead cannot hear or feel, and the deaf do not hear. At this, Luka appears.

Act 2 Analysis

Part of Gorky's definition of the doctrine of Socialist Realism was an active agent—something by which one is "induced to transform [the world] into a splendid place for all mankind united into a single family." In *The Lower Depths*, Luka takes on the role of that agent, attempting in his way to induce others to transform some small part of their world or themselves and break free of their prison. That he does this by telling stories, if not out and out lying, contributes to some of the most interesting scenes and symbols of the play.

Throughout the play, the Actor complains bitterly that he has ruined his life by drinking. Whereas once he was a known and respected actor receiving accolades for his stage performances, now he can no longer remember the verses that once came so easily to him. Luka tells him that there are towns with treatment centers, hospitals that can cure him so he can start again. Such places did exist in other countries at the time, though perhaps not in the Russia, where hard drinking was prevalent at the time, and the Government profited greatly from public consumption, but since the Actor seems not to have heard of such places, the very idea seems more fantasy than reality. Satine, ever the skeptic, tells the Actor that Luka has lied, that there is no reason at all for him to try to change, no hope at all that he might start again.

Luka also tells the dying Anna that she will find peace and rest when she dies, and speaks with a voice of authority that she does not question. He tells Pepel that he should take Natasha and run away to Siberia, "a fine country—a land of gold." Again, his words seem more like fairy tales than reality, but perhaps any words spoken by someone outside the dark, static world of Kostilyoff's boardinghouse would ring false, as they would seem so far off and out of reach of those imprisoned there by their lives.

Act 3

Act 3 Summary

The setting changes for the first time, taking us outside the rooming house to "the Waste," the yard in the back. It is strewn with rubbish and overgrown with weeds. Nastya and Natasha sit on a beam, where Nastya is telling a sad love story, which she claims is the tale of her own life. Luka, the Baron and Kleshtch sit nearby listening. Bubnoff is listening through a window of the boardinghouse, so only his face is visible. Partway through the story, one that she has apparently told before, Nastya calls her lover by a name she has not used before, and Bubnoff and the Baron immediately begin ridiculing her. Luka stops them, saying that it is not what she says that matters, but the meaning behind the words, and encourages her to continue. He even says he believes her: "You're right, not they! If you believe you had a real love affair, then you did—yes!" Natasha then admits to the others that she, too, lies to herself, and that she often invents a life of happily ever after for herself.

When Luka returns, without Nastya, he asks the others why they tease her, which prompts Natasha to ask why he is so good. He responds with yet another story, this one about two escaped convicts he befriended when he realized that they, like him, were simply human beings and that by being kind rather than killing them, he discovered their true nature. He believes that kindness can be taught. Bubnoff claims he can only speak the truth. Kleshtch shouts out that his truth is that he hates everyone. Pepel enters the Waste and they talk about how Kleshtch seems to have gone mad since the death of his wife. Luka blames it on his broken heart, Pepel on his loss of work. They continue their discussion on the nature of truth, and Luka tells yet another story, this one about a man in search of a land of righteousness, where everything was peaceful and good. No matter how hard his life became, he was always heartened by the thought of finding that land. When he finally learned that there was no such land, he struck out at the man who told him the truth, then hung himself.

Bubnoff alone finds the story amusing. Luka announces that he plans to leave for the Ukraine, where he has heard that people have discovered a new religion that he wants to see. This inspires Pepel to profess his love to and ask Natasha to run away with him to Siberia. She admits that she does not feel the same, but Luka encourages her to go anyway, just to get away. Vassilisa, eavesdropping, makes nasty comments from the window, and Kostilyoff enters the scene, demanding to know why Natasha has not finished her kitchen duties. Pepel misjudges his relationship with Natasha and tells Kostilyoff that she is no longer his servant, which angers Natasha and amuses Vassilisa. Luka warns Pepel yet again not to be carried away. Kotilyoff tells Luka to leave, tries to insult him by implying that a man with no home and no work has no worth, but Luka remains unruffled. He likens himself to something that grows in fertile ground.

Luka tells Bubnoff he is set to leave. Bubnoff jokes that Luka may be getting out just in time, and reveals that he once did the same, leaving town just before following through

on a plan to kill his wife and boss. At this, Satine and the Actor enter, once more arguing whether or not there really exists a town with a hospital where the Actor can go to be cured of his drinking. The Actor is sober, and has even earned thirty kopecks that day sweeping the streets. He is cheerful.

Luka takes Satine aside and asks why he, an educated, bold lad, came to be as he is, and why it is that he must keep trying to derail the Actor's attempts to help himself. Satine answers that four years and seven months in prison taught him how to play cards and how to see the world through suspicious eyes, and to give up any pretensions he may once have had. When Kleshtch complains that he can no longer work since he had to sell everything to pay for Anna's funeral, Satine says he should be happy—now he can do nothing, and be a burden to the world at large like so many others, but Kleshtch is aghast: if everybody were to quit working, he says, everybody would starve.

From Kostilyoff's rooms come the sounds of screaming, shouting and breaking crockery. Satine shouts through the window. Luka, shaken, looks around for Pepel, and the Actor runs to find him. Bubnoff remarks calmly that they beat Natasha a lot, but that this seems rather worse than usual, and offers to go see. Satine, Zob and the Tartar are in the room where the fight is going on. Satine urges Zob to strike Kostilyoff, which he does. Miedviedieff enters and the Tartar, his arm in a sling, steals his whistle. Miedviedieff does nothing to halt the beating. Kvashnya and Nastya support Natasha, looking disheveled, and Satine clears the way, pushing Vassilisa out of the way and calling her vile names. Aloyoshka takes the whistle and whistles it directly into her ear. Pepel rushes in. Kostilyoff shouts for the policeman to grab him and Pepel aims a punch at Kostilyoff that lands squarely and knocks him off his feet. Vassilisa shouts for everyone to set upon Pepel the thief, while Miedviedieff tells Satine to stay clear of family affairs, Pepel tries to find out how hurt Natasha really is and Kvashnya sees that her feet have been scalded. The Tartar, as always, demands the facts. In the middle of the chaos, Vassilisa discovers that Kostilyoff is dead, and silence falls over the crowd.

Vassilisa immediately accuses Pepel of murdering her husband, and he responds that she got her wish, and accosts her until Satine and Zob pull him away. Satine points out in his rational way that everyone was fighting and that he, too, got in a couple good punches at Kostilyoff, and that even if it was Pepel's final blow that did him in it was manslaughter during a fight—self-defense, a minor offense. Pepel says no, that Vassilisa had been urging him all along to kill her husband. Hearing this, Natasha gets the idea that Pepel and her sister conspired all along to kill Kostilyoff. She demands that the two of them be taken to prison—and her self as well.

Act 3 Analysis

Clearly, there have been some major transformations in Act III. Kostilyoff is dead, which is an irreversible way of escaping one's staid life. Vassilisa and Pepel are bound for prison—the real thing this time. Kleshtch is, if not truly mad, then teetering on the edge, which is at least a metaphorical journey to another place and time. In addition, Luka

himself has disappeared, vanished in the chaos—although, to be fair, Gorky gives no actual stage direction to this effect, merely tells us in Act IV that it was so. Presumably, many actors cast as Luka in various productions throughout the years have had a different interpretation of when and how best to slip away. Satine, fascinatingly, steps out of his role as passive, sardonic naysayer to jump into the fray and take an active role, the first time in the play he's done so. This is important, as he undergoes a nearly unbelievable character change in Act IV. Without this bit of foreshadowing one would be tempted to discount his monologues in Act IV as completely inappropriate. Gorky himself was never fully comfortable with how they came off, perhaps feeling that he had not fully developed Satine earlier on enough to carry the weight of these speeches.

The two telling stories come from this act—the thieves/kindness story and the righteousness/despair story. Both are important setups for the resolutions for the fourth act, which, without them, would feel superfluous, as most the truly dramatic action takes place at the end of the third act.

Act 4

Act 4 Summary

We are back in the dark recesses of the boardinghouse. The partition that used to form Pepel's room is gone. Kleshtch locksmith anvil is gone, too, but he is still there, this time working on a concertina. Satine, the Baron and Nastya sit at the table drinking. The Actor lies up on top of the stove, coughing. They are discussing how Luka vanished during the middle of the chaos of the fight. Nastya admits she loved him, because he saw and understood everything. Kleshtch calls him merciful, and the Tartar points out that the law of life was the law of his heart—that is, he was good. They discuss goodness, which Kleshtch relates to the Gospels, the Tartar to the Koran, and Satine to the Criminal Code. Nastya, tiring of their conversation, wonders why she stays, and vows melodramatically to leave, naked on hands and knees if need be.

Satine starts in once more on the Actor and his hopes for the elusive hospital cure, which the Actor continues to maintain he will find although, significantly, he speaks of this journey in the third person, already distancing himself. He quotes a verse (from some unknown source): "This hole shall be my grave—I am dying—ill and exhausted…" and the Baron tells him to hush up. When Nastya joins the argument, Satine suggests they all just stop interfering with each other as Luka did. Kleshtch, in a rare moment of clarity, says, "He persuaded them to go away—but failed to show them the road…." Once again, they discuss truth. Satine makes his longest speech yet, and one in which he goes beyond his normal unemotional, disbelieving point of view to champion the absent Luka's view that the world needs its fictions, and most especially, the downtrodden need their fictions to give them hope. He expands on it by saying that once man is free, he no longer has a need for lies, somewhat implying that this is a goal for which to strive. The Baron mocks him, but Satine continues, even telling a story of his own—that is, repeating one of Luke's, the message of which is that everyone lives in hope of a better life for himself; that we must respect each individual, because we never know which of us will make some contribution that helps advance society as a whole. The others listen thoughtfully, and then the moment dissolves into petty squabbling.

We learn that Natasha has disappeared without a trace, and that Vassilisa and Pepel are both still in prison awaiting trial. When the Baron threatens to strike Nastya, Satine surprises himself by requesting that the Baron not offend her so much. Soon after, he launches into a soliloquy in which he says that all men deserve respect, not pity, and expounds on the infinite potential of the free man. The Baron admits that he has never felt fully free, as a certain fear has always fogged his brain. The Actor asks the Tartar, who has been praying at his bunk, to say a prayer for him, then climbs down from the stove. He pours a shot, drinks it quickly and rushes out. Miedviedieff and Bubnoff wander in drunkenly, followed by Alyoshka and eventually by Zob. Kvashnya comes in looking for her new husband, Miedviedieff, and we learn that they have become the new landlords. Kvashnya is angry with Alyoshka for spreading gossip that she beats her husband, and that she has been seen pulling him around by the hair. She says such

stories hurt the poor man's feelings. The Tartar, finished with his prayers, has been trying in vain to sleep, the boarders exhort him to join them in song and Bubnoff and Zob begin singing their prison song. They have only just begun when the Baron and Nastya rush in to tell everyone that the Actor has hanged himself out in the Waste. Satine says, "Damned fool—he ruined the song."

Act 4 Analysis

Satine's lofty speech telling us that man must be treated with respect, not degraded by pity, seems to run counter to his earlier defense of Luka's comforting fictions. We know that Satine considers himself a realist, believing only what he can see for himself. How then, can we reconcile his two viewpoints—that everyone deserves respect, not pity, but some people need to be lied to? The key is that Satine never endorses lying, and even implies that he has never lied himself: "Lots of people lie out of pity for their fellow-beings!" he says. "I know! I've read about it!" He says that lies are needed by the weak. If the weak can become strong, they no longer have need of the lies. "Truth is the religion of the free man," says Satine, and indeed that is his credo. Thus, he tries to show respect to his friend the Actor by revealing what he believes must be the truth-that Luka's fabled hospital does not exist.

In Act III, Luka told a story about befriending two thieves who might have killed him with axes had he not treated them well, saying that a human being can teach another one kindness. In Act IV, we see that he has in effect replayed the story at the boardinghouse, seeing each of the denizens as an equal and treating him or her with dignity and respect, and in return gaining their trust, faith and, in Nastya's case, love. The only people completely immune to what Satine calls the bewitching of them all (although the Baron claims to remain unmoved by Luka) are the three people in positions of real or affected authority: Miedviedieff, Kostilyoff, and Vassilisa.

The other story of note in Act III was the tragic tale of the man who, upon discovering that the land of righteousness did not exist, hanged himself. In the end of Act IV, the Actor hangs himself. Are we to assume that he does so simply because he failed to find what he was looking for, in this case, the hospital? That may work on a simple level. Yet the Actor has no new knowledge about whether the hospital does or doesn't exist or where it might be, and earlier in Act IV he is still planning to go, so that seem unsatisfying as the whole reason. When the Actor rushes out, Satine has just finished the third of his lordly sermons on the glorious existence and potential of man, followed by the Baron's summation of his own life as having been rather pointless and silly—what little he can actually remember of it. This suggests that perhaps the Actor is not so disturbed by the idea that he will not be cured after all, but that he has lost so much of his life. He has squandered that innate potential Satine speaks of; becoming a weak man who needs lies to give him hope, and therefore by Satine's definition has not been free. Perhaps he was recalling his own words from the first act in which he said that talent is nothing but faith in oneself.

Luka vanishes as mysteriously as he appeared, out of nowhere, without fanfare, without goodbyes. This gives him an ethereal, otherworldly character that is fully in keeping with his role as a sort of "outside agitator"—the stranger who enters the static lives of the boarders and sets things in motion.

Some characters are in motion. Vassilisa is in prisons. Pepel is in prison, too, but if Satine is right then he may get only a light sentence, and then be free to move on—perhaps to Siberia, after all. Kvashnya and Miedviedieff are married. Nastya is determined to leave. Natasha's is the brightest ray of light shining into Gorky's dark play. She alone escapes from prison-like existence and, while we do not know where she has gone, she will be better off than before.

The announcement of that the Actor has hung himself comes just as the porters and Bubnoff are singing, "the sun rises and sets, but my prison is all dark…." This prompts Satine, who has spent most of Act IV delivering some deep, philosophical monologues, to say quite matter-of-factly that the Actor has ruined the song. Considering that he tries so hard to impart to his listeners that man is truth, and that man is not one person or another but all people, from beginning to end, it is hard to believe that he might just be saying that the suicide has interrupted an entertaining musical ditty. More likely, he is trying to show us that he recognizes that Zob and the Tartar and Bubnoff seem quite happy in their prison. The Actor, on the other hand, has finally come to realize the truth about him and he is therefore no longer content with the comforting lies. However, as a weak man who has no hope without those comforting lies, he can find no path to freedom but by his own hand. Satine realizes that the Actor has drastically altered the pattern of their lives, which is, in fact, their *real* prison song.

Characters

A Baron

The Baron is a slightly ridiculous, cynical character, once an aristocrat, now a resident of the lower depths who reminisces on his former status. His philosophy is "all is past", and he expects little from the world although he retains his aristocratic bearing. A great deal of animal imagery is associated with this aristocrat who has fallen to the level of beast.

A Tartar

The Tartar has little role until the final act, when his hand has been mashed and he has little hope of supporting himself without it. Before then he participates in a game of cards and repeatedly advocates fair play. He offers such practical insights as "someone can have the bed" when Anna dies. In Act IV he champions Luka's reputation and tells the others that the Koran leads his heart, while for Russians religion is law. When the actor asks him to pray for him, he replies, "Pray for yourself," suggesting both practical, personal advocacy and lack of brotherly love.

The Actor

The actor is an alcoholic whose addiction has obliterated his memory. His hypochondria is humorous, and he shows compassion for the ailing Anna, but he is a pathetic character who pines for his past. He gets some false hope from Luka that his addiction can be cured, and attempts some restraint, but ultimately he fails and commits suicide at the end of the play.

Alyoshka

Alyoshka is a comic character, often drunk, who shows up largely for comic relief. He is provocative and tells rumors about people in authority, namely Wassilissa and, later, Kvaschnya.

Bubnoff

Bubnoff is a capmaker, whose first line in the play is a grunt of skepticism. This foreshadows his role as one of several cynical voices throughout the play. For example, when he hears that Anna is dead, his response is "There will be no more coughing." At more than one point in the play, Bubnoff and others sing about life as a prison, offering a sense of his world view.

Wassilissa Karpovna

Wassilissa is the young, bitter wife of Kostiloff. She wishes for freedom from her circumstances and tries to achieve it by coercing her lover Pepel to murder her husband. When Pepel refuses and she learns of Natasha's intent to run away with him, she brutally beats her sister. This leads to Pepel's accidental murder of her husband. Natasha accuses Wassilissa and Pepel of conspiring to the murder, and Wassilissa ends up in jail.

Anna Kleshtch

Anna is the terminally ill wife of Kleshtch. She both wants to die and escape the misery of her life, and is afraid to die, but she takes some consolation from the ministrations of Luka. When she dies nobody cares very much, aside from concern about the smell and the authorities.

Andrew Mitritch Kleshtch

Kleshtch is a locksmith who is always working on a lock that can't be mended. He sets himself apart from the others on account of his work ethic, which they do not share. He is extremely bitter, and claims he will be free from his circumstances when his wife, Anna, dies. When she finally does die, he has to sell his anvil and other tools to cover funeral costs, and so he can neither move on nor work. He is an angry man with no sense of brotherhood, and says in Act III, "I hate everyone."

Michael Ivanowitch Kostilioff

Kostilioff is the hypocritical, corrupt landlord of the lodging house. He preaches religion, salvation from hardship, and brotherly love, but he takes his tenants for all they are worth. Although he purchases stolen goods from Pepel, he treats him with suspicion and disdain, and is always trying to confirm the suspected affair with his wife. In Act TIT, Pepel comes to Natasha's defense when Kostilioff is beating her, and accidentally kills him.

Krivoi Zoba

Krivoi Zoba is part of the same chorus of skeptical voices as Bubnoff. He too sings the song of disaffection and life as a prison, and when Anna dies he asks, "Will she smell?"

Kvaschnya

Kvaschnya is a spirited middle aged woman who, at the opening of the play, sermonizes on why she will never marry again. She shows up sporadically, generally pouring forth

on the same theme, but when the play closes she is married to the policeman and running the boardinghouse.

Luka

Luka is the central catalyst of the play. He is an old man, labeled a pilgrim, who arrives in Act I, greeting the decrepit lodgers with "Good day, honest folk." Throughout three of the four acts, he maintains this role of champion of mankind, but his methods of support are shifting and problematic. While he bolsters the Actor's hope and resolve with a story of a free clinic where he can be cured, for example, he can never tell him where it is, and thus appears to advocate self-deception. Because of his shifting messages, Luka is the most problematic character in the play. Having set in motion the conflict in Act III, Luka disappears, leaving the remaining characters, except for Sahtin, disheartened and changed for the worse.

Medviedeff

Medviedeff is a policeman and the uncle of Natasha and Wassilissa. He is generally ineffectual and some characters make a mockery of him, but he ends up marrying Kvaschnya and running the lodging house with her.

Nastiah

Nastiah is a prostitute who pines for a lover, real or imagined, left behind. She reads romance novels and tells improbable stories of this lost lover with shifting accounts of his name. Nastiah is strongly impacted by Luka, and in the course of the play her view of life grows increasingly dim. By the end of the play she says she is disgusted with everyone.

Natasha

Natasha is the younger sister of Wassilissa, who abuses her throughout the play because Pepel fancies her. While she wishes to be rescued from her life of drudgery, she is leery of Pepel's advances. In general she is a kind, compassionate character, but after she is beaten in Act III she turns on her protector, Pepel, and her accusations send him to jail. It is revealed that once she is released from the hospital, she disappears from the area.

Waska Pepel

Pepel is a young thief who sells his goods to his landlord and has an affair with Wassilissa, his landlord's wife. He is a good man at heart despite his life of crime, and aspires to marry Natasha and make a better life. When Wassilissa and Kostilioff brutally

beat Natasha, he comes to her defense and accidentally kills the landlord. Natasha turns on him and accuses him of planning the murder with her sister. When the play ends, Pepel is jail.

Sahtin

Sahtin is a former convict who apparently was once well-educated and is a lover of words. At the opening of the play he has been beaten after losing a card game. Throughout most of the play he is drunk and gambling, but he generally offers witty, intelligent, and provocative wordplay. He challenges Luka for pacifying people with lies and philosophically is his opposite, but after Luka leaves he says he understands his impulse to comfort and soothe the troubled. In Act IV he delivers three monologues about the righteousness of mankind and the theme of "truth" versus the "consoling lie." His assertion is that compassion and the consoling lie are necessary for the weak, but the truth is the way of the free man. In the final act of the play, Sahtin is the only character who has not been changed by having given in to illusions of hope provided by Luka.

Themes

The "Truth" vs. the "Consoling Lie"

The main philosophical issue in *The Lower Depths* is the central theme of the work, the merits of the truth versus the consoling lie. Luka, the pilgrim, embodies the philosophy that people need lies as buffers against the hardships of life. The first instance in which he demonstrates this conviction is when he soothes the dying Anna with promise of peace after death. His conversation later with Bubnoff and Pepel indicates that he may not believe in such an afterlife, but, rather, is committed to consoling one who suffers. Through Acts II and III Luka bolsters the hopes of characters who are downtrodden and suffering, by kindling hope with potentially insubstantial information. For example, he is quick to assure Nastiah that he believes her love story although it is clearly not true, in the interest of protecting her feelings. Similarly, he tells the Actor that he can be cured of his alcoholism at a free clinic in an unnamed town, if only he resolves to change. The Actor does achieve some personal change in the short term, and for a while he is inspired and can recite lines of poetry as in days of yore. In much the same way, Nastiah is comforted by Luka's moral support, and Anna dies more contented than she would have otherwise. However, once Luka disappears, and with him his encouraging stories, the characters are disappointed and more downcast than they were before he came.

Different characters question Luka's soothing fabrications throughout the play. When he consoles Anna, Pepel asks Luka if he believes his own words. Bubnoff, Kleshtch, and Medviedeff also question Luka, but Sahtin most fully embodies his foil as a character in pursuit of the truth. During most of the first three acts, Sahtin operates as a background voice projecting skepticism and harsh realism, as at the end of Act II, when he responds to sentimental-ism with "The dead hear not. The dead feel not." In Act IV, however, he is thrust into the foreground with three monologues concerning the power of the truth for mankind. Although he appreciates Luka's motives for showing compassion to people who suffer, he does not advocate compassion himself. Rather, he asserts that "The lie is the religion of the servant and master . . . the truth is the inheritance of free men!" He continues in this vein to praise man and credit him with the ability to advance himself through the pursuit of truth. The disparity between Sahtin's wild optimistic humanism associated with the truth and the human need for sympathy and compassion is the life-giving center of the play.

Hell/Prison

The theme of life in the lower depths as like prison or hell circulates throughout the text. The title is immediately telling; these scenes from Russian life are about what is dark, underground, buried. Lower depths, as opposed to height or the heavens, suggest hell by sheer proximity, and the miserable lives of the residents make this connection clear. Lack of light also suggests the dark side, or hell. So does lack of meaningful work, or

progress, as suggested by Kleshtch's ceaseless scraping at a lock that can never be mended. In Acts II and IV, Bubnoff and Krivoi Zoba sing a song about being in prison, never seeing the sun rise or set, and this sets a tone for life in this underground cavern. Even in Act III, which is set outside, a brick wall is described as blocking out "the heavens." The fact that there is little or no private space, and that benches and bunks operate as beds further serve as prison imagery. Different characters throughout the play make reference to release from this life, as if they are serving time. Anna awaits death as relief from a life of suffering, Kleshtch waits for her to die so he can be free of the boardinghouse, and Natasha fantasizes that someone will come and rescue her. None of the characters are released except by death, and in fact two characters actually go to prison. Kleshtch in particular is even more firmly rooted in the lower depths once his wife dies, because he must sell his work materials to cover funeral costs. The song about prison is the last impression before the announcement of the Actor's suicide at the end of the play. The fact that Sahtin responds with, "He must spoil our song... the fool" suggests that, like the sinner condemned to an eternity in hell, he may not have any insight into his own condition.

Men as Animals

Degradation is a part of life in the lower depths, and the undercurrent theme of people as animals or beasts indicates this condition. Early in Act I the Baron calls Nastiah a "silly goose" for reading romances, humiliating her in front of the rest of the boarders. Moments later the former aristocrat dons a yoke for carrying containers to market, suggesting he is a workhorse. Shortly afterward, Kleshtch sarcastically suggests Kostilioff "Put a halter around my neck..." to use and degrade him further. All this imagery so early in the text sets the tone for the play, in which people are degraded and treated inhumanely. The lodgers' social and economic circumstances have reduced them to subservience to their landlord, but the way they behave toward each other also reflects inhumanity and a survivalist, animalistic mentality. For example, the fact that most characters are unmoved by Anna's suffering and death, aside from how it hurts or benefits them in a practical sense, reflects a lack of feeling that distinguishes human from other animals. In addition, much of the time the lodgers display a lack of intelligent insight into their own situations, but rather compound their problems by getting drunk and gambling away their money or getting beaten up. Subsisting in the underground cavern like animals in a den, the lodgers cannot see beyond their circumstances, but huddle together for survival.

Style

Realism

As a realistic play, characters, plot and setting are crucial components of *The Lower Depths*. Socialist realism entails lifelike depiction of characters' behavior and speech for purposes of conveying a political message. In *The Lower Depths*, characters speak and behave in somewhat fragmented, lifelike patterns and what they do and say are not romanticized to elicit audience emotions. Instead their various words and behaviors, however unappealing, are aimed at being realistic and provoking an impulse toward change or revolution. In *The Lower Depths*, some characters provoke contempt, others compassion, but the general sense at the end of the play is that social change is necessary. For example, when Nastiah complains that she feels superfluous, and Bubnoff confirms that everyone is superfluous, the response of the reader or audience is reflexively that a world should exist in which people do not feel superfluous.

Setting

Setting in *The Lower Depths* is minimal, as are stage directions. In Acts I, II, and IV, the set is dark and cavernous, with very little furniture aside from a few bunks and benches, suggesting a prison or a pit. The set in Act III is a depressing vacant lot, with various piles of rubbish and a wall which blocks out the sky. There is little or no color, and stage directions give the sense that characters are dressed in rags. Both settings convey a sense of the impoverished conditions of the lodgers, and attribute to them a feeling of desolation and despair. They generate in the audience the sense that these conditions are inhumane and should be changed.

Point of View

Throughout *The Lower Depths,* the audience gathers opinions about key characters, especially Luka, through the points of view of other characters. Every time Luka offers solace or tells a story, some character engages him or criticizes him, and especially in Act IV there is a detailed conversation analyzing him. In this way, the audience is offered multiple options for interpreting this provocative character, and for developing a personal opinion of the central moral question. This structure also keeps the audience from developing a strong emotional identification with any one character, which makes for more even-handed political assessment.

Monologue

Monologue is used to similar ends in the play. The most important monologues are delivered by Sahtin in Act IV to convey his opinion on the importance of the truth. Use of this device draws attention to the subject matter by making it stand out from the rest of

the lines. In this case Sahtin voices a response to discussion of Luka's ethics, and in so doing establishes himself as Luka's moral foil. The monologues in this act depart from the realistic structure of the play in the sense that people tend not to speak in such substantial chunks in a conversation. In this case the author's moral agenda takes precedence over realism.

Foreshadowing

Foreshadowing is the use of symbols, lines or events to suggest something that will happen later in the play. In *The Lower Depths* the main events are foreshadowed before they occur. First, in Act II Pepel and Kostilioff are arguing heatedly, and as the conflict comes to a head, Luka makes his presence known, ostensibly to prevent Pepel from striking Kostilioff and getting himself into trouble. This foreshadows the fact that Pepel will in fact strike Kostilioff in Act III and inadvertently kill him. Earlier in the same scene, Luka tells a story of a man who believed in a land of justice, but when he learned it didn't exist, he killed himself. Later, in Act IV, the Actor interjects into the conversation that soon he will be gone, and quotes, " 'this hole here... it shall be my grave...'" Shortly afterward he actualizes those words, and, like the disillusioned man in Luka's story, commits suicide.

Symbols

Gorki provides few physical props to serve as symbols in *The Lower Depths,* but those he does provide resonate with meaning. The lower depths themselves are symbolic of the conditions for the lodgers, as a grave, as prison, and as hell. The bunks and lack of furniture also speak of a prison or hell. One item stands out from the drab, minimalist setting, and that is an old Russian stove. The characters cluster around the ornate piece of antiquity for warmth in much the same way they gain solace from reminiscing about their pasts. The stove suggests a connection with the romantic Russia of the past.

Above and beyond the presence of physical objects, human characters serve as symbols in *The Lower Depths*. Luka and Sahtin represent the philosophies they embody and, some critics would conjecture, conflicting beliefs of the author. The ridiculous, ostentatious Baron stands for all of aristocracy, in much the way that Medviedeff's silliness pokes fun at law enforcement in general. Kostilioff stands for anyone who lords power over others, while the Actor plays a fool. The characters represent components of Russian society as well as the moral messages each advocates.

Historical Context

The period in which Gorki lived and wrote *The Lower Depths* was the end of a long period of repression and unrest in Russia, during which the czardom increasingly became an autocracy which governed by force. In 1861, under the Edict of Emancipation, Alexander II freed peasants from serfdom. Serfs were emancipated from servitude to nobles in much the same way blacks would soon be released from slavery in the American South: with little or no support to smooth the economic transition. Freedom afforded the peasantry was extremely limited, and although they were no longer considered chattel, peasants had access to even less farmland than they had before Emancipation. This new freedom imposed harsh economic conditions on the peasantry, and as a result, many moved to cities and centers of industry for work. Gorki's youth as a tramp on the move fits the description of many of the newly displaced, looking for work..

Emancipation effectively opened the doors for industrialization of Russia, and factories underwent phenomenal growth. Waves of peasants in an unfamiliar, urban environment, were, naturally, exploited. Factory work conditions into the turn of the century were far worse than those revealed in the famous investigations of English factories, including child labor, interminable workdays and unsafe, unhygienic conditions. Cities were newly crowded and could not accommodate the influx of people with suitable housing. Recurrent crop failure resulted in severe and widespread famine, which was at its peak in 1891. Poverty, already the norm in the days before Emancipation, was compounded by a severe trade depression in 1880, resulting in the dismissal of thousands of workers. Between 1880 and the turn of the century, unemployment was a huge problem, and created the community of drifters such as those depicted in *The Lower Depths.* In *Maxim Gorky The Writer, An Interpretation,* F. M. Borras points out that "Klesctch of all Kostylev's [Kostilioff's] lodgers most richly deserves compassion, because he does not dream of escape from the depths through a miracle, but plans to achieve it by means of hard work and yields only when he realizes that this most reasonable of all purposes, because of social conditions, cannot be fulfilled. In the years of industrial recession, 1899-1903, such men as Kleshtch, wishing to work but unable to find jobs, would strike a chord with the audience."

As a writer and an intellectual, Gorki was not among the working class who were so impacted by Russia's social conditions, but he was extremely sympathetic to the plight of the masses, having been a drifter as a child and a young man. His use of socialist realism in *The Lower Depths* is geared toward representing both the terrible living conditions and the feeling of unrest in the country at the time. The fantasies of release and escape, such as Pepel's dream of running away to make a new life with Natasha, reflect the Utopian dream which was universal in Russia, especially among the working class, who were influenced by Marxism. The tension between the Utopian fantasy that Luka instills and the brutal truths and self-reliance that Sahtin advocates reflects Gorki's view of forces at work in Russia. His didactic tone in Luka's and Sahtin's speeches, while characteristic of his own style, reflects his agenda of social reform. Around the

same time, Tolstoy, another famous Russian author, had taken on a similar tone in what amounted to propagandistic writing.

Production of *The Lower Depths* preceded the Russian Revolution of 1905 by just over two years. This revolution was characterized by strikes, assassinations, and peasant outbreaks in protest of the corruption of the czarist government, although little reform resulted from the event. World War I resulted in massive food shortages and such widespread civilian suffering, however, that a new revolutionary climate was created by the end of 1916. Lenin and Trotsky led the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, which resulted in many radical reforms, such as abolition of private property and introduction of workers' control into factories. The Russian Civil War followed, between the Bolsheviks (Reds) and anti-Bolsheviks (Whites), from 1918 to 1920. The Bolshevik party was victorious, but the country was devastated, and the Soviet regime which followed largely perpetuated Russia's legacy of repression and suffering.

Critical Overview

When *The Lower Depths* was first presented in 1902, it was met with mixed criticism, but spectacular popular success. It was so successful, in fact, that the printed version of the play became a bestseller, with fourteen editions printed in 1903. Many critics took issue with the play's unconventional structure and lack of plot. Others criticized its preaching, didactic tone. Most agreed, however, that the Moscow Arts Theatre production was outstanding and amplified character sketches that were powerful and moving. Debate over the play's chief theme, the merits of "truth" verses "the consoling lie," continue today, and it is generally accepted that the play, although flawed, is considered a masterpiece.

At the time *The Lower Depths* was first performed, the vagabond life was in vogue, and realistic depiction of the lower classes was avant-garde. The play's presentation of the squalid underbelly of Russian society was the first of its kind and drew huge attention for its novelty. Much of the play's initial success was owed to the masterful work of Konstantin Stanislavsky and the Moscow Arts Theatre, which was then and continues to be considered one of the finest theater groups in the world. In *A History of Russia,* Jesse D. Clarkson notes that the play was a success "largely thanks to Stanislavsky's casting rather than to its author." Stanislavsky and Gorki insisted that the players spend time in dosshouses resembling the one in the play in preparation for their parts, and word of this approach also added to its novelty. Although Gorki himself gave the theater company credit for the scale of the play's initial success, it proved just as popular performed by German actors in Berlin. The play swept world capitals, and by 1903 Gorki's American publishers claimed his name was better known than Tolstoy.

Chekhov (as critic Sumie Jones records) was perhaps the most famous critic of *The Lower Depths,* and he took issue with some of Gorki's character choices. He claimed the characters that remain in Act IV are not interesting, and critics continue to take issue with this point today. Barry P. Scherr, in his essay "Gorky the Dramatist," asserts that "at least some of the characters do not seem entirely necessary. The Baron, the Actor, Bubnov, and the locksmith Kleshtch are all dwellers in the lower depths. Gorki manages to make individual characters out of each of them, yet the play would clearly be easier for audiences to follow had he combined these four figures into one or two, and the story-line would have remained intact." He also points out that "the characters who are most important for the play's intrigue the thief Vaska Pepel, Kostilioff, owner of the lodging-house where the action takes place, and Kostilioff s wife and sister-in-law have relatively little to do with the play's philosophical concerns."

Many critics disliked the structure of the play and its lack of driving action or plot. German critic F. Mering (as critic F. M. Borras records) wrote in a 1934 article that the only real conflict in the play took place between Kostilioff and Pepel, and that Act IV was unnecessary since all the action was completed in Act III. Chekhov declared Act IV superfluous as well, because all the stronger characters were absent from it. He also disliked that Act for what he felt was Gorki's preaching tone. Sumie Jones, in her essay, "Gorki, Stanislavsky, Kurosawa: Cinematic Translations of *The Lower Depths*," quotes

Stanislavsky in reporting that Chekov could not bear "to see Gorki mount the pulpit like a clergymen" to voice his opinions, as he does through Sahtin's monologues in Act IV. The play elicits the same criticism today, as in a review of a production at the Royal Lyceum Theatre in Edinburgh. Kate Bassett, in *The Daily Telegram* writes, "... several of Gorky's big speeches about the ineradicable worth of every individual and about man's responsibility for himself do verge on the wooden."

In the years after the first production of *The Lower Depths,* Gorki was his own chief critic. Over time, as his philosophical and political beliefs changed, he gave shifting interpretations of key characters, and suggested he intended them to be different than they were. According to Yevgeny Zamyatin in A *Soviet Heretic,* he called himself "a poor playwright" and suggested the play was even harmful in the time it was produced. Nevertheless, the play is, in Barry Scherr's words, "the prime example of a work that is an acknowledged masterpiece and yet contains several seemingly glaring weaknesses that would be enough to destroy a lesser work." He continues, "... the strength and originality of the secondary figures, the creation of a strange yet powerful central character, the very exotic quality of *the lower depths* that Gorky depicts, and the complexities of the play's theme largely account for its deserved success." The Lower Depths continues to be produced almost a century later as, for example, in Seattle in 1998, by the Vladivostok Chamber Theater. In the words of John Longenbaugh in a promotional piece in the *The Seattle Weekly,* the work is still considered masterpiece of naturalism."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Lynch teaches at the Potrero Hill After School Program and the Taos Literacy Program. Lynch also contributes to Geronimo, a journal of politics and culture. In the following essay, Lynch argues that the flawed nature of Gorki's characters reveals the complexity both of the author and of humankind in general.

The Lower Depths is typically characterized as a masterpiece, but one that is glaringly flawed. The flaws most often cited are Gorki's tendency to impose upon his characters language which rings false or is agenda-driven, and the fact that certain characters are viewed as unconvincing or unbelievable. Luka and Sahtin in particular generate these criticisms. From the first appearance of the play, critics have taken issue with inconsistencies in Luka's behavior, which weaken the moral objective around his character. Gorki himself gave conflicting interpretations of Luka's purpose in the story. Critics have also questioned Sahtin as the mouthpiece for truth and mankind's potential, since this advocacy comes so late in the play and seems incongruous in a previously minor character.

Inconsistent as Luka and Sahtin may be, they are the most developed characters in Gorki's group portrait. As such, they are ambiguous, and in their ambiguity, quite human. Gorki has been criticized consistently for creating characters whose believa-bility is compromised for the sake of his work's political messages. In this case, however, although Luka and Sahtin do convey strong political messages, and Sahtin delivers speeches which are slightly implausible, their ambiguous natures the fact that they do not act in prescribed, consistent ways make them more like real people, and thus more believable. In this way they also reflect the very ambiguous, conflicted nature of the author, who was known both for his political radicalism and for being profoundly sentimental. The conflicted nature of The *Lower Depths* is what has provoked debate and discussion over the years, and in so doing, kept both the characters and the play alive.

Richard Hare, in *Maxim Gorky: Romantic Realist and Conservative Revolutionary,* reports that *'* 'According to Gorky, Luka should have been a sly old fellow, who had become soft and pliable through having been kicked around a lot." Hare continues, "Luka's rule of conduct was that men wanted to forget hard facts and be consoled; they had no need of truths which did not help them. If truths were so painful that they destroyed self-confidence, let them remain concealed." The Actor's experience with Luka exemplifies this; Luka comforts the alcoholic actor with promise of a clinic where he can be cured, although he cannot tell him where it is. The Actor is expected to gain solace from this promised clinic, without the benefit of actual, substantial support. As the advocate of the "consoling lie," Luka comforts characters with his stories, but leaves them even more disheartened after his departure. In the case of the Actor, he is so disheartened he kills himself.

In *Maxim Gorky*, *the Writer,* P.M. Borras suggests,

The influence of Gorky's particular view of Tolstoy upon his concept of Luka is ... unmistakeable.... Gorky regarded Tolstoyan theories of self-perfection, self-simplification, and non-resistance to evil as spiritual opiates through which the great man encouraged thinking people to devote their attention to problems of personal life instead of to revolutionary activity; Luka appears from nowhere in the dark dosshouse of the brutal, tyrannical Maikhail Kostylev, filled with human wrecks, and indulges their fancy with dreams of escape from the unbearable reality of their lives, instead of urging them to overthrow the tyrant who exploits them.

Luka's promises of a Utopian tomorrow suggest the dangers of such ideology; rather than incite the lodgers into action to change their circumstances, he lulls them into complacency. This is most clear when Luka consoles Anna with promise of peace after death. When Anna suggests that she might live a little longer, Luka laughs and replies, "For what? To fresh tortures." In effect, he dissuades her from hope for change.

History suggests that this is the Luka that Gorki intended. Dan Levin reports in *Stormy Petrel* that "Gorky himself insisted Luka was a charlatan." However, he continues, "the heart has its own reasons. Luka is extremely complex as complex as his maker." He goes on to report the way Kachalov, one of the Moscow Art Theatre's stars, described a rehearsal of Act II with Gorki.

"'When he began to read the scene," Kachalov wrote, "in which Luka consoles Anna on her deathbed, we held our breaths, and a wonderful stillness reigned. Gorky's voice trembled and broke. He stopped, remained silent for a moment, wiped a tear with his finger, and tried to resume his reading, but after the first few words he stopped again and wept almost aloud, wiping his tears with a handkerchief. 'Ugh, devil,' he mumbled, smiling with embarrassment through his tears, 'well written, by God, well done.'"

From this description it is clear that Gorki was moved by a part of Luka and his ability for compassion. The scene with Anna does ring true, in a way that contrasts with, for example, Luka's means of comforting Nastiah in Act III. In this scene, Luka appears glib in his insistence that he believes her implausible story, and clearly only means to soothe her in the moment. However, at other points, Luka offers sound advice with solid motives, such as in Act II, when he urges Pepel to avoid Wassilissa and run away with Natasha. The advice is pragmatic, in that Wassilissa is a dangerous woman, and both Natasha's and PepeF s needs would be met by such a union. Luka also demonstrates some challenge to Wassilissa and Kostilioff, contrary to assertions that he is a model of non-resistance. When he and Wassilissa meet in Act I, he tells her, "You are not very hospitable, mother," and in Act III he counters Wassilissa and Kostilioff's threats with indicting sarcasm. This incongruity in Luka is characterized by Levin such that, "Both drives are in Gorky: rebellion, and holy wandering. This is why when seen from one angle Luka is a fraud, from another, Gorky's deepest projection."

Sahtin is admittedly a less developed and less complex character than Luka. P.M. Borrass supports this: "Sahtin plays a relatively small part in the conversations and discussions that make up the first three acts." For the most part Sahtin maintains a drunken, upbeat realism throughout the play, consistently challenging Luka for soothing

the other tenants with stories. His realistic outlook verges on the harsh; in Act II he tries to dissuade the Actor that he will be cured of his alcoholism, and his only response to Anna's death is, "The dead hear not. The dead feel not." Although this is the strongest impression of him throughout the play, it is revealed in Act II in his conversation with Luka that he went to prison for killing a man in defense of his sister. This, and the fact that he protects Nastiah from a threatened assault from the Baron in Act IV, support some chivalric impression of Sahtin, which lends itself to the speeches he makes in that act.

Act IV begins with the remaining characters discussing Luka. Through their perspectives, the audience has another opportunity to assess his character; the Baron, for example, claims he was a charlatan, while the Tartar asserts he had a true heart. Sahtin launches into his first monologue with the imperative, "Be still! Asses! Say nothing ill of the old man.... He did tell them lies, but he lied out of sympathy, as the devil knows. There are many such people who lie for brotherly sympathy's sake...." Although he validates Luka's motivation for lying, he counters it with his primary assertion in the play, "The lie is the religion of servant and master. . . the truth is the inheritance of free men!" He continues later with, "How loftily it sounds, M-a-n! We must respect man ... not compassion ... degrade him not with pity ... but respect."

Sahtin's monologues summarize a response, advocating truth out of respect for mankind, to Luka's ministrations of the consoling lie. However, the power of these speeches is diminished by the fact that Sahtin is drunk when he delivers them, and the fact that they come from this seemingly minor character's mouth. Levin reports that "Gorky himself said that in Sahtin's mouth the lordly speech sounded 'pale' and 'strange,' but that there was no one else into whose mouth to put it." Borrass confirms, "Gorky revealed his disquiet at this ambivalence in a letter to K.A.Pyatnitsky dated 15 July 1902, in which he said that Sahtin's speech extolling Man 'sounded out of place in his mouth,' but that no other character in the play was suited to make it." Sahtin's statements about truth are in keeping with Gorki's political leanings in the sense that they credit the individual with the power to make change (and overthrow Czarism, for example). Yet the fact that they come from Sahtin suggests that the truth is not the unqualified answer to the problems of the lodgers, but perhaps that it is part of a larger, more complicated solution.

In his essay *How I Studied,* Gorki writes that as a child he learned from books that "All men were suffering in one way or another; all were dissatisfied with life and sought something that was better, and this made them closer and more understandable to me." He reports that they taught him "a sense of personal responsibility for all the evil in life and evoked in me a reverence for the human mind's creativity." In the same collection *(On Literature)* he writes to Leo Tolstoy, "I believe profoundly that there is nothing on earth better than man, and I even say twisting Democritus' sentence to suit my own ends that only man really exists, all the rest being merely opinion. I have always been, and will always be a Man-worshipper, only I am incapable of expressing this properly." Couched in these terms, his compassion for the human condition is not so incongruous with his advocacy for man's power through truth. As personifications of this two-sided,

insoluble ethical question, Luka and Sahtin reflect not only the complexity of the author, but the complexity of character itself.

Source: Jennifer Lynch, for *Drama for Students,* Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Erlich discusses Gorki's attitude toward truth and lying, suggesting that Gorki may have accepted the need to lie to further the truth but also realized the effect of lying upon people's perception of the truth.

The theme of truth versus illusion, of reality versus invention, haunts Maksim Gorky's oeuvre from his early story "*About the Siskin Who Lied and the Woodpecker Who Loved the Truth*" down to his interminable swan song *The Life of Klim Samgin,* whose unlovely hero is obsessed by the notion of having "invented" himself. Thus, what I will be offering here is no more than a few reflections on the Pushkinian dichotomy of "base truths" versus "the uplifting illusion" in Gorky's life and work or, to put it differently, no more than a gloss on Khodasevich's telling reference to Gorky's "extremely tangled attitude toward truth and lying, an attitude which was revealed early on and which exerted a crucial influence both on his work and on his life."

Lest this tack be construed as unduly invidious, let me offer, in haste, some admissions and distinctions. For one thing, Gorky is not alone among major Russian writers in allowing for the therapeutic value of illusion. Suffice it to mention that paragon of artistic integrity and clear-eyed lucidity, Anton Chekhov. The persistent pipe dream of the Prozorov sisters, "To Moscow, to Moscow!" is portrayed empathically as a way of coping with a profoundly dispiriting reality. And if we rephrase the dichotomy that is at the center of these remarks as "reality versus dream," is not the intrinsic superiority of the latter to the former one of the time-honored topoi of Romanticism? Nor is this stance necessarily a matter of seeking refuge from "revolting actuality" in dreams. (Need I recall here Gogol's Piskarev: "Oh, how revolting is reality! What is it compared to the dream?")

In a more active brand of Romanticism, clearly more germane to the young Gorky's "folly of the brave"-type rhetoric, "the given" is often seen as no more than a lump of inert matter, malleable and almost infinitely transformable by human will, commitment, and faith. Some of us will recall Adam Mickiewicz's early poetic manifesto "Piesn Filaretow": "For where hearts are on fire, where the spirit holds sway," the dead truths of science need not apply.

And yet Gorky's case is somewhat special, if not necessarily unique. For one thing, while Chekhov refuses to scorn the lovely sisters' daydreaming, he is not in the least implicated in their illusions. For another thing, in the early Gorky we are often confronted with the uneasy hybrid "romantic naturalism." To quote Khodasevich once more: "Gorky began to portray his none too real characters against the backdrop of thoroughly realistic stage sets." Moreover, and perhaps more important, his temperamental predisposition for romantic voluntarism coexisted rather precariously with other elements of the quasi-scientific worldview toward which he was groping a philosophy that was too strongly tinged with historical materialism to be openly dismissive of the claims of material reality.

But let us dispense with generalities and get down to cases, or, to be exact, to the salient case in point: for *The Lower Depths* (*Na dne),* Gorky's most famous and, despite some glaring flaws, most arresting play, is a stark if strangely inconclusive dramatization of the theme first sounded in Gorky's early parable.

You will recall the siskin's unexpectedly bold challenge to the conventional wisdom of resignation and passivity. It rises to urge fellow birds to fly forward to the land of happiness that beckons from afar. The reality-oriented woodpecker sagely intervenes to point out that the land of happiness does not exist and that what lies ahead is either a bird trap or, at best, the world being round, a return to the same thicket. The defeated siskin muses: "The woodpecker may well be right, but who needs his truth if it weighs like a stone on one's wings?"

In The Lower Depths the role of the woodpecker is assumed by one of the inmates of Kostylev's squalid flophouse, the dour capemaker Bubnov: "Now I don't know how to tell lies. What good are they? What I say is give 'em the whole truth just as it is." Luka, who enters the stage in the middle of act 1 only to exert a pervasive influence on the wretched assemblage until the end of act 3, takes a different view of the matter. When the spirited young thief, Pepel, whom he urges to seek a better life in Siberia, that land of golden opportunity, accuses the old man of fibbing, he answers in words that unmistakably echo the siskin's: "Anyway, what do you want the truth for? The truth might come down on you like an ax."

It is a matter of some moment that the champion of "truth" in *The Lower Depths* should be one of the bleakest among the derelicts. The epitome of weary resignation and grim adjustment to degrading reality, Bubnov to echo another early Gorky dichotomy is a "garden snake" (by contrast to the falcon of the oft-quoted parable) par excellence.

But how about Luka? Who is this professional "comforter" who offers to nearly everyone a word of solace or encouragement? Is he a holy wanderer or a fraud? To put it differently, is he a man of compassion and kindness or a canny purveyor of false hope, or both? Clearly, a tenable interpretation of *The Lower Depths* hinges on a more or less plausible answer to this query.

Predictably, Russian Marxist criticism, whether of prerevolutionary or of Soviet vintage, has had little use for Luka. (Though his message is at times elusive and equivocal, one thing is certain: it is a far cry from the clarion call to revolutionary struggle against the social order presumably responsible for the existence of such petty infernos as the Kostylev night lodging.) More noteworthy is the fact that Gorky himself arrived early on at a negative view of the play's chief protagonist and expressed it over the years with increasing vehemence.

There is no dearth of evidence that this was not his initial position or, in any case, not his initial attitude. M. F. Andreeva has recorded a moving scene. On September 6, 1902, Gorky read *The Lower Depths* to the actors of the Moscow Art Theater: "Gorky read splendidly, especially the part of Luka. When he came to Anna's death, he couldn't contain himself and burst into tears. He tore himself away from the manuscript, looked

at us all, and said, 'A good, a damned good job of writing!'" Another reading of *The Lower Depths* by Gorky elicited similar testimony from a Moscow writer, Teleshov: "He read very well and held his audience spellbound, especially by the part of the old man Luka." And V. A. Lunacharskii was clearly assuming that Gorky was strongly drawn to the old wanderer when adjudging *The Lower Depths* the author's temporary fall from grace.

It is a matter of record that shortly after the resounding success of *The Lower Depths* Gorky turned his back on what was arguably his most effective, certainly his most intriguing dramatic creation. As early as 1910, according to Piatnitskii, Gorky called Luka a "crook": "Luka is a crook. He actually does not believe in anything." The abuse escalates in a much later conversation with one D. Lutokhin: "What a crummy old man this Luka is! He deceives people by sweet lies and lives off them. From the outset, I conceived the wanderer as a con man and a crook, but Moskvin [who played Luka in the first Moscow Art Theater production of *The Lower Depths}* was so convincing that I did not want to argue with him." Parenthetically, this curious authorial self-effacement vis-a-vis the admittedly brilliant actor sounds a trifle unconvincing, the more so since Moskvin's interpretation of the part, though clearly engaging, was not as positive as it might have been. According to lu. luzovskii, a number of reviewers took Moskvin to task for overemphasizing Luka's slyness at the expense of his kindness. The final authorial unmasking of Luka is found in Gorky's much-quoted 1933 article "On Plays" ("O p'esakh"). Luka, it turns out, represents the most harmful and most repelling kind of comforter the type of cold, cunning, self-serving manipulator who tells suffering people comforting lies in order to get them off his back: "This is the kind of comforter Luka was intended to be, but apparently I did not carry it off." For once, it is difficult not to agree.

To suggest that this retrospective denigration finds scant support in the text is not to claim that Luka as he actually appears in the play is an unambiguously positive character, for he cuts a thoroughly unheroic figure. When the dying Anna compliments him on his "softness," he counters her praise with a candid pun: "I' ve been put through the wringer that's why I'm soft" ("Miali mnogo ottogo miagok"). Having been "pummeled" by life, he takes few chances. When Kostylev and Pepel fatally collide, Luka takes advantage of the turmoil and slips away quietly. He may or may not believe in the afterlife that he invokes while ministering to Anna, in the bright prospect he holds out to Pepel, or in the free-of-charge hospital for alcoholics that would cure the Actor of his addiction and restore to him his professional identity. But if Luka lies knowingly which, in view of his scant concern with truth, is a strong possibility he does so, I submit, not for his personal gain but out of compassion for his fellow humans.

Interestingly enough, this happens to be the contention of the protagonist, who comes as close as anyone in the play to being the authorial mouthpiece, notably Satin; conversely, it is the unspeakable Baron who, after Luka's quick getaway, declares him "a fake." To be sure, Satin is not uncritical of the "old man": at the beginning of the postmortem he likens him to "soft bread to the toothless." And in the course of his impassioned but rather incoherent monologue, he intones at some point: "Lies are the religion of slaves and bosses. Truth is the god of the free man." Yet, if act 4 was supposed to feature a post-factum unmasking of the false prophet, this does not quite

come off. For in spite of a significant difference of emphasis, Satin's overquoted harangue is at least as much a consequence of Luka's intervention as it is a challenge to his message: "The old man had a head on his shoulders. He had the same effect on me as acid on the old, dirty coin let us drink to his health." Also, "Don't touch her! Don't hurt another human being! I can't get that old man out of my head!" Shortly thereafter Satin revises the message: "We have to respect man, not pity him, not demean him with our pity!" Though the polemical intent here is obvious, it is equally apparent that Satin has been stirred by Luka's meeker preaching into his ringing and at least to this reader somewhat hollow and unearned celebration of man. (Whether one should be grateful to Luka for having triggered one of the most tiresome cliches in modern Russian literature "Man!... It has such a proud ring!" is quite another matter.)

More broadly, Luka's presence in the Kostylev flophouse proves as much a stimulant as a tranquil-izer. However tame or "toothless" his gospel, it injects a discordant and humanizing note into the dark and brutish universe of the play. The notion that every human being, however lowly, destitute, or sinful, is worthy of concern, that, to quote Mrs. Willy Loman, "attention must be paid," may not set the world on fire, but for the profoundly demoralized and dispirited denizens of the Kostylev hellhole, it proves strangely catalytic.

That Luka is at his best or at his most demon-strably benign in dealing with a terminal case such as Anna's that is, in comforting a dying woman, virtually abandoned by everyone, including her harsh, dejected husband is as much a commentary on the nature of the situation into which the wanderer has stumbled as on the built-in limitations of his ministry. When at the conclusion of his wide-ranging and hitherto judicious essay "Ideas and Images" luzovskii speaks of Luka's "total bankruptcy " and his "catastrophic" impact on the proceedings, he clearly yields to the Soviet Gorky scholar's characteristic temptation that of Luka-bashing. For as the critic admits earlier, no one, least of all a frail old man without a passport, could have prevented the bloody encounter between Pepel and Kostylev. True, the blame for the Actor's suicide could arguably be laid at Luka's door. After a brief moment of euphoria, the hapless Actor must have realized that he was too far gone to be able to shake off his crippling addiction. But even if in his case the attempt at rescue or cure proved counterproductive, indeed lethal, it simply pointed up the hopelessness of the patient's condition. Ironically, the purveyor of "exalting illusion" has produced a moment of truth.

Now this is no more than one possible diagnosis of the Luka syndrome. (One of the refreshingly un-Gorkyan qualities of *The Lower Depths* lies in its allowing, indeed encouraging, more than one reading.) What is incontestable and possibly significant is the avowed discrepancy between Gorky's alleged intentions vis-a-vis Luka and what he has actually wrought. So is the fact that, in looking back upon his most resounding dramatic success, Gorky should have been drawn into increasingly harsh and simplistic verdicts that were demonstrably at variance with the actual tenor of the play. Was his "protesting too much" a symptom of an unresolved inner conflict, of a struggle with a part of himself he was eager to submerge or control? Or is it that his instinctive attraction to any attempt to embellish and to inject color, spark, and hope into intolerably grimy and degrading reality was being overtaken and reduced to the status of a

temporary "lapse from grace" by a more exacting, more doctrinaire, and more relentlessly activist mode of mythmaking?

At the time when Gorky found *The Lower Depths* unsuited for the Soviet repertory without drastic revisions, he was about to assume the mantle of the patron saint of Socialist Realism. He had already become the most authoritative and influential literary spokesman for Soviet culture and society. As some of us will recall, at the dawn of the Soviet system he had his differences with its architects, and he stated them with remarkable clarity and forthrightness. Yet en route to his triumphal homecoming, he stifled such lingering doubts as he may have had in order to commit himself with a quasi-religious fervor to what he saw primarily, I believe, as a grand and inevitably costly project of rousing Russia out of age-old inertia and of releasing and mobilizing the immense dormant energies of the Russian people for creative toil, for industrial and cultural construction *(stroitel'stvo.).*

Significantly enough, when Gorky recalled his initial "wavering," he spoke of it by referring to such dichotomies as personal observation versus a theorist's vision or the present versus the future. In a 1933 letter to the playwright A. Afinogenov, he avers: "In 1917 my empiricism served as a basis for my skeptical attitude toward the victorious proletariat. The theoretician [Lenin] turned out to be stronger than the empiricist, closer to the historical truth; I have made a costly mistake." Another major difference between himself and Lenin, claimed Gorky in a letter of April 13, 1933, to his biographer, Ilia Gruzdev, had to do with their respective vantage points: "It is impossible to reach the proper altitude of a vantage point without the *rare ability* to look at the present out of the future." Let me suggest at this point that this "rare ability" a salient aspect of the Utopian or millenarian frame of mind has far-reaching consequences. For if what matters most, or if all that really matters, is a future whose total radiance is vouchsafed, indeed made imperative, by the total hatefulness of the past, then the ontological status of the immediate, the observable, is reduced accordingly. The present in this scheme is no more than a brief and necessarily unpleasant prelude to a preordained bliss. Its hardships, ordeals, or, if need be, horrors fade into insignificance or near irrelevance, as they are no more than way stations en route to the Promised Land. To put it differently, it is easy to construe what is demonstrably and bleakly but only provisionally there as somehow less real than what is dimly perceived, if at all, on the horizon.

Now it is my contention that, at the late stage of his far-flung career, Gorky's congenitally ambivalent or "tangled" attitude toward mere fact made him singularly vulnerable to the temptations of political utopianism and especially prone to deny recalcitrant realities or to explain them away. Perhaps the most dismal example of this tendency is the notorious collective volume in which, under Gorky's aegis, thirty-four gifted Soviet writers Gorky was forever mindful of literary quality cheerfully reinterpreted a major forced labor camp as an educational institution. And then there is a revealing outburst, briefly referred to by Khodasevich, in a 1929 letter to an incisive emigre essayist, E. G. Kuskova, who had just accused Gorky of taking a one-sidedly favorable view of the Soviet regime:

The fact is that I hate with a passion the truth which for 99% of the people is an abomination and a lie. I know that reality is miserable for 50 million who make up the masses of the Russian people and that men have need of another truth which does not debase them but which lifts their energy in toil and creation. What is important for me is the rapid and general development of the human personality, the birth of a new ... man. What is important for me is that a worker in a sugar refinery reads Shelley in the original. He is an excellent man, full of fervor and confidence. He does not need this impoverishing and lying truth in which he defeats himself and has need of a truth in which he creates himself.

It would be churlish and pettily empiricist to require statistics about Shelley-lovers at the Soviet sugar refineries. What is more serious is the hasty dismissal of the avowed misery of fifty million people. Yet especially unsettling and germane to my argument is the rhetorical manipulation of the word *truth,* the slippery distinction between two kinds of truth the good (mobilizing, uplifting) and the bad (disheartening, paralyzing). Clearly, where the main requirement is not congruence with some observable fact but rather uplift and edification, the very notion of truth is effectively subverted.

It is this instrumental approach to truth that informs some of the advice that the grand old man of Soviet literature was dispensing to his younger confreres in the 1930s. Solicitude for talent, delight in genuine creativity, had always been one of Gorky's most admirable characteristics. His encouragement of, and empathy for, that spirited band of gifted and searching young writers, the Serapion Brothers, including their fiery spokesman, the irrepressible Lev Lunts, was first and foremost testimony to Gorky's concern with the quality of Russian prose fiction. Yet it was also a token of his regard for the freewheeling Russian literary imagination. Gorky the Socialist-Realist pundit is much more circumspect and pragmatic. The core of his already-quoted letter to A. Afinogenov is a sharply critical assessment of the younger man's then-current play, *The Lie*. According to the editors of the Gorky issue of *Literary Heritage, The Lie, despite* several revisions, incurred Stalin's displeasure; as a result, "Afinogenov asked the theaters to remove *The Lie* from their repertories."

Gorky's judgment is largely negative. Were the play, he opined, to be performed before a select and ideologically mature audience, it would not do much harm. Yet to show it to millions of Soviet citizens would not be appropriate. Gorky goes on to invoke the awesome resonance of Soviet literature: "We write not only for the proletarians of our land but for the world proletariat."

Let us note, on the run, the openly paternalistic variation rung here on the traditional Russian theme of the writer's social responsibility. A man who in 1917-18, aroused by the revolution, felt that nothing less than candor was owed to the people now seems to urge a distinction between two truths the exoteric and the esoteric. As it happens, what is at issue here is precisely the legitimacy of tampering with the truth for the good of the cause. At some point in *The Lie* a Communist would-be intellectual *(intelligent)* declares: "The masses ought to trust us, without asking whether this is true or not." Another protagonist, apparently a well-intentioned but somewhat muddled activist, chimes in: "With a lie one can live snugly [lit. *teplee*, "warmly"]." Gorky is clearly unhappy about

this: "If you intended to posit in this muddled fashion the necessity of lying in the struggle for the victory of the proletariat's universal truth, the effect of the way you have done it is to call into question the greatness of this truth."

I find it difficult to shake off the impression that what Gorky is objecting to here is not the nature of the sentiment expressed but infelicitous attribution. Gorky seems to allow that temporarily withholding from the masses the truth for which they are not ready, so as to hasten the triumph of "the proletariat's universal truth," may well be necessary. Yet in order to lend credibility to this proposition, Afinogenov would have to find a more impressive vehicle. By failing to do so, his play, if shown to a mass audience, would be apt to confuse an ideologically immature viewer, not to mention the fact that its inordinate candor might give aid and comfort to the "enemy."

Some Gorky watchers have claimed that he found it increasingly difficult to countenance this kind of moral double-bookkeeping. Presumably, the "base truths" of the terrible decade began to seep through the barrier of his insistent denials. Did he come to feel, as his long journey was coming to an end, that, to paraphrase his letter to Afinogenov, he "had made a costly mistake?" We may never know.

Source: Victor Erlich, "Truth and Illusion in Gorky: The Lower Depths and After: Essays in Honor of Robert Louis Jackson," *in Freedom and Responsibility in Russian Literature,* edited by Elizabeth Cheresh Allen and Gary Saul Morson, Northwestern University Press, Yale Center for International and Area Studies, 1995, pp. 191-98.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Pickowicz discusses Gorki's The Lower Depths to show that the differences between it and the Chinese adaptation Ye dian are more significant than the similarities.

Stage and screen productions of *Ye dian* [Night lodging] were quite familiar to urban Chinese born in the 1910s and early 1920s. The play was first performed in 1946 and won considerable acclaim. It must be regarded as one of the ten or twenty most important Chinese plays *(huaju)* of the first half of the twentieth century. The movie version was screened widely in China in spring 1948 and is generally viewed as one of the most serious films of the early post-war era. In the 1950s the play was staged in Singapore and other overseas Chinese communities. Both the play and the film were banned in China during the Cultural Revolution, but enjoyed a measure of renewed popularity in the early post-Mao period. Older people in particular expressed a strong nostalgic interest in Republican era works and thus were especially eager to see plays and films of this sort rehabilitated and relegitimized. In summer 1979 the play was restaged in Shanghai, and in fall 1983 the film was featured in Beijing and Shanghai in major retrospectives of notable pre-1949 movies *(Zhongguo dianying huigu.)*

Very little detailed scholarly attention has been paid to *Ye dian*, but short, glowing commentaries on its popularity and merits abound. Invariably these writings note that both the stage and film versions of *Ye dian* are "adapted'' *(gaibiari)* from Maxim Gorky's 1902 play entitled *The Lower Depths (Na dne.)* But what exactly does "adapted" mean? Almost nothing is said in such writings about the precise relationship between Gorky's work and the Chinese productions. Since critics have not been inclined to dwell upon the differences between the Chinese works and the Russian original, the impression is often left that the stage and screen versions of Ye dian strongly resemble what one finds in *The Lower Depths*. The distinguished film historian Cheng Jihua and his collaborators briefly discuss the film under the heading of "Ke Ling's adaptation based on Gorky's play." Jay Leyda goes so far as to refer to the movie as Huang Zuolin's "filming of Gorky's *[The] Lower Depths."*

A related matter is the connection between the Chinese play and the Chinese movie. A biographical sketch of Ke Ling, who co-authored the stage play and single-handedly wrote the screenplay, observes that the film is a "cinematized" *(dianyinghua)* variation of the play, but that the "content [of the film] is basically the same as [the content of] the play." Cheng Jihua and his co-editors write that "With the exception of a reduction in the number of lines for [the character] Jin Buhuan, a comparison of the film *Ye dian* and the stage adaptation shows that the rest is basically the same. The film adopts *(caiqu)* some of the plot *(qingjie)* and characters *(renwu)* from the original Gorky work, but what it describes is Chinese social life. To be more precise, the film *Ye dian* is a new creation that refers to the original work." Vague as these characterizations may be, they share one thing in common: they underscore essential continuities that link all three works. In brief, the underlying spirit of Gorky's play was retained in the sinified stage and screen

adaptations. Writing in 1947, director Huang Zuolin himself emphasized the commonality of "meaning" *(yisi)* that bound the Chinese play to the Russian original.

These types of commentaries simply do not prepare one for a comparative reading of the three texts. The Chinese play and movie most certainly brought Gorky's original work into the mainstream of twentieth-century Chinese stage and film culture, but the sinification process fundamentally altered the work. The discontinuities are far more pronounced than the continuities. Furthermore, as Ke Ling pointed out to me in a 1983 interview, the Chinese play and the Chinese movie are strikingly different. Gorky might have been able to recognize the contribution of his own work to the Chinese stage production, but he probably would have denied the existence of any substantive link between *The Lower Depths* and the remarkably sentimental Chinese movie.

The Lower Depths: A Russian Play

To understand better the relationship between *The Lower Depths* on the one hand and Ke Ling's screenplay and Huang Zuolin's film *Ye dian* on the other, it is necessary to begin with a discussion of Gorky's four-act play, which was first performed by the Moscow Art Theater in 1902. Two general points need to be underscored. First, there is not much of a plot in this play, and what there is of a plot is relatively unimportant to the communication of the play's moral message about the relationship between illusion and truth. Similarly, no single character becomes a central focus of attention or dominates the dialogues. Instead, the play offers a collective sketch of the pathetic inhabitants of a rundown lodging house in a Volga town at the turn of the century. The inn caters to a *"bosyak"* clientele, that is, an underclass of people "who did occasional odd jobs but mostly lived by their wits," a "motley, shiftless, and often criminal fringe" that was especially numerous in port towns.

A second basic point about the play is its deeply pessimistic implications. Gorky's portrait of the downtrodden masses is extremely dark and grim (or, as one critic put it, "bleak and sullen"). Indeed, Gorky seems to be indicting Russian culture and society in general when he highlights the profound backwardness of this repulsive corner of society. Daily life involves little more than endless cycles of drunkenness, violence, vulgarity, fear and persecution. No heroic figures emerge and there are no indications that meaningful change is ever going to take place. In *The Lower Depths* human beings resemble a pack of caged animals, each struggling to survive one more day.

Sympathetic and hostile critics alike generally agree with this assessment. Harold Segel, who liked the work, has observed that the play is "static and oppressive in atmosphere" and that "the total environment of the cellar flophouse lingers longer in the memory than any finely etched individual portrait." Writing in 1903, Max Beerbohm, who despised the play, complained bitterly that *The Lower Depths* had "no meaning, no unity, nothing but bald and unseemly horror." He added that the theater audience demands of the playwright who deals with "ugly things" something more than the mere "sight of his subject matter." P.M. Borras noted that "When *The Lower Depths* was first presented most critics regarded it as a static play, a series of sketches from life without internal links, a naturalistic work almost devoid of action and dramatic conflicts." Anton

Chekov, who liked almost everything but the last act, wrote a letter to Gorky in which he said, "you can say goodbye to your reputation as an optimist." Critics also note that Gorky strongly discouraged sentimental renditions of the play.

There is virtually no action in the first act. Instead, a host of colorful characters who reside in the inn are overheard in detailed and animated conversation on a wide range of topics. These figures include a thief named Peppel, a capmaker, a locksmith and his sickly wife, a pudgy woman who sells dumplings, a cobbler, a broken-down actor, a fallen aristocrat and his female companion who works as a prostitute, an incompetent local policeman, a couple of longshoremen, an elderly wanderer, and a murderer named Satin.

The lodging is run by its miserly owner, an old man named Kostylyov, and his vicious young wife, Vassilissa. Their family unit includes Vassilissa's younger sister, Natasha.

Peppel, the thief, works closely with Kostylyov and Vassilissa, who support and encourage his criminal activities. They buy, at significantly discounted prices, many of the objects Peppel steals. Furthermore, Peppel is Vassilissa's lover. Kostylyov is suspicious of the relationship, but has no concrete evidence. Peppel, however, has grown tired of Vassilissa and has decided to terminate their romantic ties. He is now attracted to her unmarried younger sister, Natasha. Vassilissa is aware of his new interest and realizes she has no future with Peppel, but she is jealous of Natasha and abuses her. Natasha, for her part, distrusts Peppel.

The second and third acts of *The Lower Depths* are the important ones for the purposes of this discussion, because they constitute the raw material reprocessed by Chinese stage and screen artists more than forty years later. It is in these acts that something resembling a plot surfaces from time to time. By dwelling on these traces of a plot, however, I do not mean to contradict the view that the plot is of secondary importance in this play.

In the second act two relevant developments take place. First, Anna, the locksmith's sickly wife, comes increasingly closer to death. Her abusive husband ignores her suffering. Luka, the elderly, somewhat senile and highly religious wanderer, tries his best to comfort Anna. He reassures her that there is a heaven, that she will go to heaven, that there is no suffering in heaven, and that any additional suffering she has to endure on earth will be worth enduring because she can look forward to an eternity of peace. Gorky scholars have paid an enormous amount of attention to Luka, a figure who specializes in giving hope to desperate people by telling them sweet lies about the future. Luka is a peddlar of "illusionary truth." It is Peppel, the thief, who cruelly spoils Anna's momentary peace of mind by loudly ridiculing the old man's soothing commentary. This episode ends with Anna lying distraught on her bed.

A bit later Vassilissa wants to discuss a private matter with Peppel. She knows their relationship is almost over and that Peppel is attracted to her younger sister. She offers to facilitate the union of Peppel and Natasha and to pay Peppel 300 rubles if he will do her a favor: arrange at once to have her husband, the innkeeper Kostylyov, killed.

Peppel immediately rejects the offer. Neither he nor Vassilissa knows that Luka, the old wanderer, has overheard the entire conversation. The meeting ends when Kostylyov walks in, curses his wife, engages in a minor scuffle with Peppel and withdraws with Vassilissa. Luka, who has seen everything, senses that there will be more trouble and advises Peppel to seek a happy future by running away with Natasha.

Immediately thereafter Luka and Peppel discover that Anna, the locksmith's suffering wife, has died. They depart in search of Anna's husband, and the body is discovered for a second time by Natasha, who fears that one day she will end up the same way. Act two ends with a discussion (that does not include Peppel or Luka) about what to do with the body. It is agreed it should be buried soon, otherwise it might begin to smell. The residents urge the locksmith to report the death to the police immediately, lest the authorities think foul play was involved. A few tenants agree to make minor contributions to cover funeral expenses, not because they feel compassion, but because they want to get rid of the body as soon as possible.

It is not until the third act that the relationship between Peppel and Natasha is treated in detail. This requires a long dialogue in which an uncharacteristically charming Peppel finally declares his love for Natasha. In the end she agrees to run away with Peppel, as the friendly wanderer has suggested, but her distrust and suspicion of Peppel never really disappear. Unfortunately for the couple, Vassilissa has overheard the conversation and suddenly intrudes on the scene. Before long Kostylyov shows up and gets into another shouting match with Peppel. Eventually Peppel exits and Natasha is taken back into the family quarters.

After a substantial delay, Natasha is subjected to a savage beating by her ruthless sister. Her screams fill the inn and draw a crowd. Before long Peppel shows up and, together with others, gets into a fist fight with Kostylyov. It is important to note here that Peppel is seen striking Kostylyov. Suddenly the old man collapses and dies.

In an extremely interesting turn of events, Vassilissa accuses Peppel of beating her husband to death and demands that the police be summoned. Peppel responds by saying that she should be pleased because she had been encouraging him to kill her husband. Natasha does not know what to believe and concludes at the end of the act that she has been lied to by Peppel and that Peppel and Vassilissa conspired all along to get rid of the old man so they could be together. Both Peppel and Vassilissa are jailed by the police.

The final act, the one Chekov disliked so much, is much like the first one. There is very little action. The dialogue is mainly among the other residents of the inn, who speak randomly on a variety of unrelated topics. In other words, life is back to normal after the recent commotion. Peppel, Vassilissa, and Natasha do not appear in the last act. Luka, the wanderer, has vanished into thin air. It is revealed, however, that both Peppel and Vassilissa are still in jail and that Natasha simply disappeared after a brief stay in a hospital. Just before the curtain falls, the rambling conversations of the residents are interrupted by the news that the drunken actor, realizing that he too was given false hopes by the old wanderer, has just hanged himself. No one seems to care.

Source: Paul G. Pickowicz, "Signifying and Popularizing Foreign Culture: From Maxim Gorky's *The Lower Depths* to Huang Zuolin's Ye dian, " in Modern Chinese Literature, Fall, 1993, Vol. 7, no. 2, pp. 7-31.

Adaptations

The Lower Depths was adapted as a Chinese film entitled *Ye 'dian* or *Night Lodging* in 1948. It was first performed on stage in 1946. Both stage and screen versions were banned in China during the Cultural Revolution.

In 1957, Akira Kurosawa directed a Japanese film adaptation of *The Lower Depths* (translated as *Donzoko)* starring Toshiro Mifunge.

In 1936, Jean Renoir directed a French film adaptation of *The Lower Depths* entitled *Les Bus*, or *The Underworld.* At the time the film was made, the French social climate resembled pre-Revolutionary Russia in its Utopian yearnings.

Topics for Further Study

The Lower Depths was made into a French film in 1936, a Chinese film in 1948, and a Japanese film in 1957. What social, political, and economic factors in France, China and Japan might have contributed to the play's appeal at those respective times?

The Lower Depths is considered a prime example of Socialist Realism. Research Socialist Realism and explain how and to what ends the play embodies this literary device.

Research both Romanticism and Realism in literature. How did they evolve, and how are both manifested in *The Lower Depths*?

Research the period preceding the Bolshevik Revolution. What social and political influences do you think the characters Luka and Sahtin represent?

Consider social and economic conditions in the United States today. How might a contemporary American version of The Lower Depths look?

Consider the central theme in *The Lower Depths.* Discuss the merits and problems of the "truth " and the "consoling lie," and argue your own moral stance on the issue.

Very few props and stage instructions are provided by Gorki for *The Lower Depths*. If you could direct the play, how would you make the set support the thematic material of the text? Use plenty of detail and back up your reasoning.

Compare and Contrast

1861: Alexander II emancipates serfs from landed nobility. Upon release, they are provided with less land than they previously held, and many were forced into the corrupt factory system and an even more brutal quality of life.

Today: Virtually no signs of the antiquated class system of peasantry and nobility exist.

Mid-1860s: Emancipation gives rise to industrialization and, as a result, the beginnings of capitalism in Russia. It is squelched by the Bolshevik Revolution, after which workers gained control of factory management.

Today: Since the end of the Cold War in 1989, Russia has been moving in the direction of capitalism. Although some conditions have improved, Westernization of the former Soviet Union has recently been disastrous for its economy.

1917: The Romanoff family, czarist heirs of the Russian Empire, along with many other heads of state, are executed as the Bolsheviks take power.

Today: Boris Yeltsin resigns from power with diplomatic immunity.

1917: Milyahov, the first foreign minister under the new government after the Bolshevik Revolution, is forced to resign based on his insistence on continuing the war effort.

Today: Yeltsin is pressured to resign, and is replaced by Vladimir Putin, a former unknown, who is propelled into leadership based on his enthusiastic support of war in Chechnya.

What Do I Read Next?

Twenty-Six Men and a Girl, published in 1902, is considered Gorki's best short story. It describes the brutal conditions of a provincial bakery.

Anna Karenina, written By Leo Tolstoy in 1877, is one of the most widely read Russian novels ever, and considered an artisitic masterpiece. This story of love, romance, deceit and jealousy is characteristic of traditional Russian themes in literature.

Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard was, like The Lower Depths*, produced by Stanislavsky's Moscow Arts Theatre. Written in 1904, Chekhov's characters are dominated by an atmosphere of hopelessness and disillusionment, much the way Gorki's characters are.

Beween 1930 and 1937, reform-oriented John Dos Passes wrote his U.S.A. trilogy, *The 42nd Parallel, 1911,* and *The Big Money.* These experimental novels paint a portrait of America through stream of consciousness and news articles.

Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906) shocked the world with its gruesome depiction of conditions in a meat-packing plant. Controversy over the novel colored the labor movement at the time.

Cesar Chavez: Labor Leader, written by Maria E. Cedeno in 1993, details the life and times of America's most prominent labor leader of the late 20th century.

Further Study

Borras, F. M. *Maxim Gorky the Writer: An Interpreta-tion*,Oxford University Press, 1967, pp. 167-17

Borras discusses much of Gorki's work, and *The Lower Depths* in particular, in detail.

Becker, George J. *Realism In Modern Literature*, Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1980, pp. 151-162.

This book provides a short discussion of Gorki's work, and substantial information on Realism in Rus sian literature and the evolution of Realism in general.

Levin, Dan. *Stormy Petrel: The life and Work of Maxim* Gorfcy,Appleton-Century, 1965, pp.88-95.

This book both provides analysis of Gorki's work and contextualization of that work in his life.

Hare, Richard. *Maxim Lrorky: Romantic Realist* and *Conner votive Revolutionary*, Greenwood Press, 1962, pp. 56-61.

Hare discusses Gorki s work in the context of his life, with focus on the influences of Romanticism and Realism over his writing.

Bibliography

Bassett, Kate. "The Arts: Modern Depths Hit Heights," in *The Daily Telegraph*, August 26, 1999.

Borras, *F. M.Maxim Gorky the Writer: AnInterpretation,Qn*-ford University Press, 1967.

Clarkson, Jesse *D. A History of Russia,* Random House, 1961, p. 364.

Gorki, Maxim*. The Lower Depths,* Branden Publishing Company, 1906, pp. 7-108.

On Literature, University of Washington Press, 1973, pp. 16, 22, 363.

Jones, Sumie. "Gorki, Stanislavsi, Kurosawa: Cinematic Translations of The Lower Depths," in Explorations: Essays in Comparative Literature, University Press of America, 1986, p. 189.

Longenbaugh, John. *"Diving the Depths,*" in Seattle Weekly, November 19-25, 1998.

Scherr, Barry P. "Gorky The Dramatist: A Reevaluation," in 50 Years On: Gorky and His Time, Astra Press, 1987, pp. 40-41.

Zamyatin, E. I. *A Soviet Heretic*, University of Chicago Press, 1970.

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Drama for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Drama for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535