Night Study Guide

Night by Tatyana Tolstaya

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Introduction

Tatyana Tolstaya's "Night" relates the story of a middle-aged, retarded man and his eighty-year-old mother, who has devoted her life to caring for him in their Moscow apartment. Characters on the edge of society, such as Alexei and Mamochka, are not unusual in Tolstaya's stories; in fact, she acknowledged in an interview with *Publishers Weekly* that she writes of Russians who are "always a little bit crazy."

Most of Tolstaya's stories, including "Night," are set in a Russia experiencing the tremendous and sometimes traumatic changes of the late 1980s and early 1990s. The Berlin Wall has been torn down, and the monolithic Soviet Union, with its numerous communist satellite states, is crumbling apart. Russian society is economically and politically fragile, and this is reflected in the vulnerability of such characters as Alexei and Mamochka. They scrabble for a living by selling the cardboard boxes Alexei glues together, and they must tiptoe around the neighbors with whom they share cleaning and cooking space.

The *Paris Review* published "Night" in 1991 for Western audiences after its Russian publication in 1987. For both her first collection of short stories, *On the Golden Porch,* and her subsequent collection, *Sleepwalkers in a Fog,* which includes "Night," Tolstaya received high praise for her magical language and inventive use of imagery.

Author Biography

Tatyana Tolstaya was born May 3, 1951, in Leningrad, U.S.S.R. (now St. Petersburg, Russia). As the great-grandniece of the Russian author Leo Tolstoy and the granddaughter of Alexei Tolstoy, Tolstaya comes from a distinguished literary family; but, according to Marta Mestrovic's interview in *Publishers Weekly* with the author, she hates "being discussed as a relative of someone."

Still, Tolstaya's background is undeniably one of culture and education. Her father was a physics professor who taught her two languages, and her maternal grandfather was a well-known translator. Many of her six siblings are involved in the arts, and one brother is a member of the Russian parliament. Tolstaya graduated from Leningrad State University in 1974 with a degree in classics and Russian literature. Upon graduating, she took a position as an editor at a Moscow publishing house.

When she was thirty-two, Tolstaya began to write in response to what she saw as the lack of solid new literature. According to Mestrovic's interview, the author looks to twentieth-century Russian literature for inspiration and cites Vladimir Nabokov as a major influencing figure. Her stories began appearing in Russian literary journals in the 1980s, and in 1987 her first collection of stories, *On the Golden Porch,* written in Russian, appeared in the Soviet Union to high praise. Knopf published the book in translation in 1989, and it garnered additional kudos from readers and critics in the United States. In 1988, she became a writer-in-residence at the University of Richmond, and since then, Tolstaya has taught at other U.S. institutions including Goucher College, Princeton University, and the University of Texas.

Tolstaya is a regular contributor to magazines and journals such as the *New Republic* and the *New York Review of Books* and has published short stories in the *New Yorker.* In 1991, another compilation of her stories, entitled *Sleepwalker in a Fog* and also written in Russian, was published. Critics praise her use of language in her stories, as well as their stark realism and unique, if sometimes crazy, characters. *Sleepwalker in a Fog* includes the story "Night," also published in the Spring 1991 issue of the *Paris Review.*

Plot Summary

In the Morning

"Night" begins as Mamochka and her retarded adult son, Alexei, wake up in their communal Moscow apartment. Alexei wakes from fantastic dreams filled with dragons, dwarves, and mushrooms, but Mamochka's rising is much more ordinary: she is occupied with replacing her false teeth, reattaching a hair piece, and clothing her stout frame. Alexei waits in his bed for his mother to "give the order" to get up and begin his day.

Mamochka guides Alexei through his morning ritual of teeth brushing, ear washing, and toilet flushing, coming in behind him to make sure he has not left a mess. In Alexei's mind, getting through his morning rituals is similar to following a large map with the dangers clearly marked and with Mamochka as his "experienced pilot." The dangers are the people in the apartment building he and his mother live in, but she helps guide him through these hazards. The neighbors have complained about Alexei and his odd behavior, so Mamochka must always take care that he does not upset any of them as they use the apartment's shared bathroom and kitchen.

One dangerous person does nearly trip up Alexei's otherwise smooth morning—the Sea Girl, as he calls her. The Sea Girl fascinates and excites Alexei, although he is clueless about sexual attraction and finds that women terrify him. "It isn' t clear what they're here for, but they are very unsettling," he thinks about women. The Sea Girl winks at him in the hallway, attracting Alexei's attention, but Mamochka comes to the rescue, chastising the woman for going after "a sick man" and behaving like a "shameless hussy."

After breakfast, Mamochka sets Alexei up at his work table in the apartment, where he glues cardboard boxes for a pharmacy. From this work his mother collects a bit of money. Mamochka putters around the apartment while he works, eventually falling asleep in her chair.

In the Afternoon and Early Evening

Alexei hates to part with the boxes he has made and angrily thinks about seeing people throw them in the trash after they leave the pharmacy. Once he found some of his boxes in the apartment house's trash and began screaming, "Who dared do this? Come on out, why don't you?" Mamochka arrived and calmed him down, but Alexei's violent behavior frightened the apartment's residents.

While Mamochka is asleep in her chair, Alexei decides to keep two of the boxes for himself, hiding them under his pillow. When she wakes up, they walk to the pharmacy to deliver his boxes, and he tries to delay the inevitable by dragging his feet. While they walk to the pharmacy, he imagines that "giant wheels" and "monstrous conveyer belts" control the waning day.

On this errand, Alexei sees an ice cream vendor and begs his mother for a treat. She says he must not have any because of his sore throat, but Alexei daydreams of when he might be able to use "those monies, like other Men and Women have, one of the silvery, shiny ones; or a little piece of paper that smells like bread." When they reach Pushkin Square, Alexei tells his mother that he is going to become a writer.

Alexei remembers evenings when Mamochka has read a poem out loud to him. He enjoys this immensely, repeating the words in a slightly different format and mimicking the howling of the storm in the poem. He also remembers how, when he lies in bed at night, his body stretches and becomes huge, while the Alexei inside becomes smaller and vanishes.

In the Evening

In the evening, Mamochka dresses for bed and goes into the communal kitchen. Alexei waits for her but becomes impatient and sets out to find her. He walks into the hall and discovers that the Sea Girl's front door is open, and there is money on a table inside. He grabs the money and races out of the apartment building and down the street, searching for an ice cream vendor.

Alexei runs down the street and becomes disoriented. He realizes that he has "someone else's money" in his hands and begins to hear the people around him say that he has stolen money. "Hands point from every window, eyes shine, long red tongues stick out: 'He took the money!' Let out the dogs." Alexei is frightened and throws the money away, and he soon realizes that he is lost and alone.

Alexei becomes "stifled" by his clothes and takes them off. He sees people in the dark and thinks they are wolves. When he sees some women, he runs after them, becoming a wolf himself and thinking, "I'll pounce, we'll see just what these Legs of yours are!" Men begin to beat Alexei, hitting him in the stomach and face until he is bleeding. He cries for his mother.

Mamochka appears, upset and crying, and takes Alexei back to their apartment. She cleans him up and fixes him some warm milk and a soft-boiled egg. Suddenly, Alexei cries out, "Mamochka, give me a paper and a pencil! Quick! I'm going to be a writer!" Mamochka finds paper and a pencil for Alexei, and he begins to write the story of everything he understands, the truth he believes he has experienced that evening on the streets. He "hurriedly writes the newly acquired truth in big letters: "Night. Night. Night. Night. Night. Night. Night. Night. Night. Night ... "

Summary

"Night" is Tatyana Tolstaya's short story about a middle-aged retarded man named Alexei who lives in a communal apartment building in Moscow with his elderly mother called Mamochka. The story is one of alienation and fear symbolized by the unknown entities that are made more mysterious and dangerous at night.

The story begins in the morning, and Alexei Petrovich lies in his bed. He hears his mother Mamochka yawn, listens to the actions of her morning routine and waits for her to tell him to get up. Alexei thinks about his mother, her knowledge of everything and her facility in life. Mamochka is a big woman, and Alexei feels very small in contrast both in size and in intellect.

Now, Alexei hears the noises from the other tenants in the apartment building and imagines that they are on the deck of a ship and that Mamochka is steering for all of them. Suddenly, Mamochka yells at Alexei to "...get up! Shave, brush your teeth, wash your ears. Take a clean towel. Put the cap back on the toothpaste. Don't forget to flush. And don't touch anything in there, you hear me?"

Mamochka's words are comforting to Alexei, who considers his mother the smartest and strongest person he knows. In order to reach the bathroom, Alexei must walk through a communal kitchen, and some old women at the stove are grumpy with him as he passes by. Alexei makes a mental plea for Mamochka to take care of him.

Most of the other tenants are ready for work and have gathered in the hallway making last-minute preparations before leaving for the day. Among this group is a young woman who Alexei calls the Sea Girl. She winks at Alexei as she pulls hard on her cigarette. Fortunately, Mamochka rescues Alexei and chastises the Sea Girl for her attempts to entice her son. The Sea Girl is unfazed by Mamochka's reprimand, and Alexei is glad to be back in the apartment away from the Sea Girl. Alexei thinks that all women except Mamochka are frightening and does not understand why they need to be here.

For breakfast, Mamochka feeds Alexei some boiled sausages, and when he clumsily fumbles with his silverware, Mamochka instructs him to use his hands to pick up the meat. Once more, Alexei is grateful for Mamochka's guidance. Alexei likes the real world inside his head, but the one outside is bad. He can never remember the rules and does not understand why everyone else can remember while he has such a hard time.

After breakfast, Mamochka sets out the materials Alexei will need to glue the cardboard boxes for the local pharmacy. After Alexei completes one hundred boxes, he and Mamochka will take them to the pharmacy to get money, although it hurts Alexei to part with his beautiful boxes. The boxes are used for box lunches sold by the pharmacy, and Alexei is outraged to see his beautiful boxes torn up and thrown into trash cans after people have finished with them. One day, Alexei launches into a blind rage after seeing one of his boxes with a cigarette butt inside lying in a trash can in the apartment. Once

more, Mamochka runs to Alexei's rescue and calms him before he can fight with any of the other tenants.

Mamochka takes a nap while Alexei works, and Alexei takes two boxes from the group and carefully places them under his pillow where he can smell the wonderful glue tonight. When Mamochka awakens, mother and son walk to the pharmacy with the completed boxes. This is a trip that Alexei does not want to take, and he deliberately walks slowly and sticks out his tongue at people on the street.

Alexei sees the ice cream vendor on the corner and watches the people, mostly women, who push money through the small window and receive a frozen treat in return. Mamochka denies Alexei's request for some ice cream, and he knows that Mamochka is always right. Still, he desperately craves one of the frozen confections. Alexei temporarily forgets about the ice cream and questions Mamochka about Pushkin when they approach Pushkin Square. When he learns that Pushkin was a great Russian writer, Alexei determines that he will also become a writer. Alexei's mood calms now that he knows what he will be, and he determines to find a paper and pencil later to begin his craft.

Later that evening, Mamochka reads a story to Alexei, who makes noises to add special effects to the story. Mamochka silences Alexei and tries to calm him before bedtime. When at last Alexei lies in bed, he thinks that his legs are growing longer and that his head extends up to the dome of stars in the sky overhead. There is also a tiny Alexei who lives inside the big Alexei and is in danger of vanishing, but the combination of the two is just as it should be.

Alexei asks Mamochka to pick him up, but she declines and goes to the kitchen. While she is gone, Alexei retrieves his two stolen boxes and sniffs the comforting smell of the glue. Alexei grows impatient for Mamochka to return, so he wanders out into the hallway and sees that the door to the Sea Girl's apartment is open. Alexei can see some money lying on the Sea Girl's table, and he instantly thinks about the ice cream that was denied him earlier today.

Alexei grabs the money and runs out of the apartment building onto the street, but he realizes it is night. He is not sure where to find the ice cream vendor. Alexei's conscience begins to work, and he is sure that people passing him on the street know that he has someone else's money. Alexei begins to run, frantically sure that every eye is on him and his guilty behavior. Suddenly, Alexei throws the money away and begins to unbutton his clothes in the heat that now stifles him.

Alexei cannot see Mamochka anywhere and begins to throw himself at women on the street. Suddenly, Alexei is being beaten by men who smell of strong tobacco, and he hears women's voices telling the men to stop hitting him because there is something wrong with Alexei. Alexei cries and howls in his misery because he does not belong on the street at night and silently sends words of distress to his mother. Mamochka runs to Alexei and grabs him, crying in her relief at having found her missing son.

When Mamochka and Alexei return home, Mamochka fixes a soft boiled egg and some warm milk for Alexei, who has just remembered that he wants to be a writer. Alexei demands some paper and a pencil, and he quickly writes down the rules of the outside world which he has just learned, "Night. Night. Night. Night. Night...."

Analysis

The story is told from both the first person and the third person points of view. Most of the action is understood through Alexei's perceptions, and the author weaves Alexei's thoughts with the third person perspective almost in a stream of consciousness. For example, when Alexei lies in his bed and hears Mamochka's orders to get up, Alexei thinks, "All right, all right, Mamochka. How right everything you say is. How much sense everything immediately makes, how open the horizons become, how reliable a voyage with an experienced pilot. The old colored maps are unrolled, the route is drawn in with a red dotted line, all the dangers are marked..." Alexei's thoughts begin the section, but the author proceeds with narrative that is much beyond Alexei's mental capacities to further explain the situation.

Probably because of Alexei's limited mental capacities, the author does not provide flashbacks, memories or any foreshadowing. The story is written in a simple style to mirror Alexei's basic view of the world. Alexei's days are all the same, and he counts on the routine for his security just as he relies on his mother to guide him through the activities he has done many times.

Alexei's retardation is never defined, but his actions and the author's metaphors about him all point to diminished capabilities. For example, the author writes, "Mamochka is all powerful. Whatever she says, goes. And he - is a late child, a little bundle, nature's blunder, a soap sliver, a weed intended for burning that accidentally wormed its way in among its healthy brethren when the Sower generously scattered the full-blooded seeds of life about the earth." Through the literary device of metaphors, the author makes it clear that Alexei is compromised and was not a planned child.

To Mamochka's credit, she seems devoted to her retarded son, and he idolizes her in return. Alexei's description of his mother's morning rituals helps to explain how she overpowers his world. "... She hoists a linen frame with fifteen buttons onto her monstrous breast; buttoning it in the back is probably hard. The gray chignon is reattached at Mamochka's zenith; shaken from a clean nighttime glass, her freshened teeth flutter. Mamochka's fazade will be concealed under a white, pleated dickey, and, hiding the seams on the back, the insides out, napes, back stairs, and emergency exits - a sturdy dark blue jacket will cover the whole majestic building. The palace has been erected." The author uses the metaphor of the erection of a palace to describe the feeling that Alexei has about Mamochka's grandeur and stability in his world.

The author also uses some interesting literary devices using the spelling of words and the sound of letters. For example, when Alexei hides two boxes while Mamochka sleeps, she writes, "Mamochka fell asleep in the chair, she's snoring, her cheeks gurgle,

she whistles: pssshhew-ew-ew... Alexei Petrovich oh so quietly takes two boxes, ca-arefully, on tip-tip-tippy-toes - goes to his bed, ca-aarefully, carefully puts them under his pillow." Mamochka's "pssshhew-ew-ew" sound is a use of onomatopoeia, which means that the word is derived from a sound. In this case, the word is spelled exactly as we might transcribe the sound. This technique is much more descriptive than merely saying that Mamochka is snoring. When the author writes that Alexei "ca-arefully" retrieves the boxes, the word mimics the stealthy movements that Alexei makes so that he does not awaken his mother.

The author also draws attention to single letters as part of Alexei's description of feelings and sensations. For example, when Alexei anticipates smelling the boxes tonight, he thinks, "How the glue smells! Soft, sour, muffled like the letter F." The author repeats this technique at the end of the story when Alexei returns from his frightening excursion into the street and Mamochka gives him hot milk. Alexei thinks, "It's peaceful. Delicious hot milk, soft, like the letter N." The author draws the reader into Alexei's world by providing universally familiar sounds.

An important theme in the story is inner conflict and turmoil. Alexei is different from everyone else around him, and he spends much of his waking hours trying to discern these differences. Alexei wants to be like other people who buy ice cream with earned money, but his ill-fated attempt to leave the apartment building in search of the ice cream vendor illustrates that Alexei is not equipped to manage in society. Alexei is also confused by the presence of women other than his mother, especially the provocative Sea Girl who toys with him. Alexei loses all sense of control when he sees the women on the street and exposes himself in a confused display of his own sexual urges.

Symbolically, the story's title, "Night," represents the outside world in which Alexei is not able to manage. The author also uses irony to represent all the pleasant morning activities that Alexei anticipates in strong contrast to the dangers of the night, where Alexei collapses in fear. At the end of the story, Alexei repeatedly writes the word "Night" as his newfound truth, and in his bravery, he confronts his terror in the only way he can.

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Characters

Mama

See Mamochka

Mamochka

Mamochka is Alexei's eighty-year-old mother. She is a heavy woman, weighing well over two hundred pounds and suffering the ills of advancing age, including thinning hair and false teeth. Even so, she is Alexei's sole caretaker, and her day revolves around cooking for him, making sure he does not upset the neighbors with his odd behavior, and monitoring his work constructing the cardboard boxes that net them a bit of money when she sells them to the pharmacy. Whenever Alexei is in trouble, or about to be, she is always there to save him.

The story is told primarily through Alexei's eyes, so most of what is known about Mamochka is physical—what she looks like, how she moves, what she cooks for Alexei. She is obviously, though, a woman without much life beyond taking care of her adult son. There is no evidence or mention of any other relatives or friends, and the question of what will happen to Alexei when she dies hangs in the story's background.

Alexei Petrovich

Alexei is Mamochka's middle-aged, retarded son. He lives with her in a small, shabby Moscow apartment, constructing and gluing the cardboard boxes she sells to the pharmacy. This is Alexei's primary activity, although he also wishes to become a writer. He seems to have the intelligence of a small child and does not fully understand how to interact in society.

Alexei sees his mother as a stalwart presence in a life riddled with fear. He waits for her to tell him when to get up in the morning and listens to her careful instructions on how he must leave the communal bathroom clean for the apartment building's other residents. "Mamochka is all powerful. Whatever she says, goes," thinks Alexei. He hardly makes a move without her, and when he does, fear and trouble are the result.

Alexei is confused about women, appreciating their different smells and voices but not quite understanding how he should behave around them. He senses that the woman he refers to as the Sea Girl is interested in him and begins to move toward her in one scene. But Mamochka suddenly appears, yelling at the woman to leave her son alone and yanking Alexei back into their apartment.

Even though he is frightened of the world, Alexei wants to see some of it on his own. Most of the time, he lives in his head and in his dreams, filled with strange creatures

and fantastic scenery. Alexei tries to expand his world on the evening of the story by venturing out of the apartment and into the street by himself.

What he finds, though, is not wonderful but a frightening and confusing world. He steals money from a table inside an open door, which makes him feel watched and nervous as he runs through the city streets looking for an ice cream vendor. He feels stifled by his clothes and takes them off, upsetting passersby and provoking a man to hit him hard enough that he bleeds from his mouth. But Mamochka eventually comes after him and takes him back to the safety of their apartment.

Sea Girl

The Sea Girl is a woman who lives in Mamochka and Alexei's apartment building. She fascinates Alexei, although he does not quite understand why, but his mother knows that Alexei should stay away from her or there will be trouble. The Sea Girl is "the most dangerous creature" in Alexei's world, "big-eyed, big-tailed ... slippery, malicious, alluring," with a definite predatory nature. Alexei bumps into the Sea Girl in the hallway the morning of the story, and she winks at him. Mamochka appears before the Sea Girl can catch Alexei in her "nets," whisking Alexei away safely and calling the girl a "shameless hussy."

Themes

Society versus the Individual

Alexei and Mamochka live in a cramped and noisy communal apartment in Moscow. They must share their bathing, toilet, and cooking facilities with all of their neighbors—none of whom seems to like the mother and her son. Mamochka instructs Alexei to make sure he doesn' t touch anything in the bathroom when he goes there upon waking, and she urges him not to make a mess. Their interactions with their neighbors and with society are tentative, as if they are walking on eggshells. Even though they are surrounded by many people in their apartment, Alexei and Mamochka are not close to anyone.

Society has dictated to Alexei that he is an outsider. He does not behave as others do, and he frightens those around him with his odd behavior and occasional angry outbursts. People keep him at arm's length and often call him such names as "retard." His work gluing cardboard boxes earns money, but Mamochka handles the transactions; he longs to take coins and bills like the other people he sees and exchange them for ice cream, but that is not to be. Any possible connection to society is thwarted by the fact that he simply can't comprehend the role of women and why they smell and sound and look different. Whenever he sees a woman—except his mother—he finds the experience "unsettling."

Fear

Because Alexei does not understand the complicated "rules" with which everyone else in the world is familiar, he must wait for his mother to tell him how to behave properly. The world is filled with traps into which Alexei could fall at any moment without his mother's assistance, making his existence fearful and anxiety ridden.

When Alexei wakes, he must wait for Mamochka to tell him when it's time to get out of his bed, and when he goes into the bathroom, he must take care not to touch anything or make a mess—otherwise the neighbors will complain. Traveling through the communal kitchen looking for his mother, Alexei feels as if he has stumbled on a gaggle of witches in the woods, cackling over their iron pot of bats' eyes and toad lips: "Old ladies grumble at the hot stove, they're stewing poison in pots, they add the roots of terrible plants, follow Alexei Petrovich with bad looks." With that, Alexei calls out for his mother. Other people frighten Alexei, especially the Sea Girl. She is "the most dangerous creature" because she produces urges and feelings in Alexei that he does not understand.

When Alexei decides to try his luck beyond his mother's care, the results are frightening and confirm his vision of the world as a dangerous place. He steps outside their apartment to search for Mamochka and is compelled by an open door to steal money

sitting on a table. His realization that he is carrying stolen money pushes him out of the building and further into the city night, where he forgets the rules of conventional behavior and is beaten bloody. Only when he is back in his apartment with Mamochka does he feel safe.

Dreams and Perception

Alexei lives his life removed from the world. When he sleeps at night, his dreams transport him to another world filled with mushrooms and dragons. In fact, he even feels that he splits into two people at night, one of whom almost completely disappears while the other grows so large that he bumps up against the night sky and stars.

Even when Alexei is awake, he views events through a fairy-tale looking glass. He compares the typical morning ritual of bathing and eating to navigating a map where each twist and turn exposes a lion, a rhinoceros, or a whale that "spouts a toy-like fountain." Thankfully, though, Mamochka is there as the "experienced pilot" to guide him on his way. The woman who winks at him in the hall is the Sea Girl, and people standing in the street at night are wolves.

After Alexei has been beaten up in the street for taking off his clothes and running after women, he begins to believe that now he understands "the Rules, grasped the laws of connection of millions of snatches and of odd bits and pieces." In short, he believes that his bloody and painful brush with the real world has provided him with a picture of "the newly acquired truth" and that this will renew him.

Style

Use of Fantasy

Tolstaya gives Alexei a vivid fantasy life, and he delivers his story through a magical lens. Due to his mental illness, he is not grounded in reality. When Alexei sleeps, he exists in a world filled with strange plants and imaginary animals. As well, even when he is awake, Alexei sees wolves, lions, sea creatures, and other beings where there are people. The act of passing by another apartment building is filled with mystery for Alexei, and he believes its occupants are able to "fly like white doves, flitting from balcony to balcony."

"Slice of Life"

"Night" takes place in one day, beginning in the morning and ending at night. A few times the main character, Alexei, remembers things in the past, such as the women he once noticed at the beach; but primarily the action takes place within that twenty-four-hour period.

The story focuses on how Mamochka and Alexei usually spend their days, and thus it exposes a "slice" of their lives. The mother and son wake up in the morning, clean themselves, get dressed, and have breakfast. During the day, Alexei constructs cardboard boxes while Mamochka monitors him or naps. Toward the end of the day, the two take his finished boxes to the pharmacy to receive their payment. They then return home for dinner and read a story out loud.

This day is different, however, because of what happens at the end of the day. Alexei becomes impatient waiting for Mamochka to return from the kitchen, so he wanders down the hall and takes money from a table sitting just inside an apartment's open door. Frightened at what he has done, Alexei races out into the street, where he attracts the attention of a group of men who respond to his odd behavior by beating him. His mother arrives to save him and bring him back home where he will sleep and begin his life again the next day.

Use of Atypical Characters

In Alexei and Mamochka, Tolstaya has created characters who are almost to be pitied for their situation. They are nearly under siege in their communal apartment, surrounded by people who are waiting to catch them in a misstep. There are no heroes in this story, only strange and struggling humans.

Alexei, with his bald spot, is middle-aged (or approaching middle age) but with the mentality of a very young child. Life for him is as fantastic as a fairy tale, filled both day and night with such creatures as the Sea Girl and with confusing moments tinged with

terror. The high point of his day comes at the end, after he has been beaten up and is safely ensconced in his apartment with his mother; he writes over and over the word "night."

Mamochka is somewhat sympathetic, if only because she has stuck with her retarded son through thick and thin. Alexei sees her as being as steadfast and reliable as a sturdy building. Her physical description makes her almost cartoon-like, though, with her enormous size and lumbering movements. Her entire life is focused on making sure that Alexei gets through the day with a minimum of trauma and retribution from the neighbors.

The people who surround the mother and son are never compassionate or even simply considerate. When they aren't calling him names or beating him, those around Alexei avoid him. The Sea Girl approaches Alexei but only through sexual taunts that he does not quite understand, and the women in the communal kitchen scare him with their "bad looks."

Point of View

Most of the events in the story are seen through Alexei's eyes, which gives the story's action a fairytale cast. The thoughts in Mamochka's head are never exposed; she is portrayed through Alexei's extreme reliance on her, making her almost larger than life.

Tolstaya has, however, included two points of view: third person and first person. For example, when Alexei and his mother leave the apartment to take the boxes to the pharmacy, they cannot travel down to the first floor in an elevator because this frightens him. The paragraph in which Tolstaya writes about this begins in the third person: "Down the stairs, only not in the elevator—you can't close Alexei Petrovich up in the elevator: he'll begin to flail and squeal like a rabbit." Then, in the next part of the paragraph, Alexei's voice emerges: "Why don't you understand?—they're pulling, pulling on my legs, dragging them down." This replicates Alexei's dream-like existence in the language of the story.

Historical Context

Tolstaya began writing when she was about thirty-two years old, in the mid-1980s, a turbulent period of Russian history. One primary reason for the country's unsettled mood was that, after more than sixty years of continued official oppression, change was in the air. The Soviet Union's new leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, initiated a novel policy of openness referred to as *glasnost.* The Soviet Union was in the middle of severe economic crisis, and some were even questioning the government's legitimacy. Gorbachev believed that immediate social reforms, including increased government openness, were the only way to save the country.

Before the initiation of Gorbachev's policies, the Soviet government subjected dissidents and protesters to political trials, accusing them of anti-Soviet agitation and treason. They were often sentenced to internal exile, prisons, or psychiatric hospitals, or even forced to leave their homeland. Prisoners faced harsh physical environments, severe work requirements, restricted religious freedom, and extreme isolation. In addition, most were forced to cut all ties to their families, friends, and colleagues.

Some believe that one of the things that prompted *glasnost* was the increased urbanization and educational level of the Soviet Union. More and more Soviet citizens were becoming middle class and holding professional jobs. Others claim that the nation's miniscule economic growth rate of only 2 percent a year in the early 1980s, along with decades of promised social and fiscal reforms, forced the Soviet leadership to consider a more open society and a more market-oriented economy.

Gorbachev launched his *glasnost* policies in a society that did not have a history of political freedom and human rights. Many in the Western world took these concepts for granted, but they were foreign to most people in the Soviet Union. Despite this, Gorbachev sponsored candid public debates in workplaces and communities throughout the mid-to late-1980s. In addition, his policies reduced state censorship of literary works and permitted controversial problems in the Soviet Union, such as alcoholism, crime, economic conditions, and major industrial accidents, to be openly presented and discussed by the media.

For example, the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear accident and Soviet officials' reluctance to let the Russian people know what had happened pushed the leadership to begin revealing information on a variety of major accidents. As well, previously censored and banned novels, such as those by Boris Pasternak and Vladimir Nabokov, were finally printed in the Soviet Union in the late 1980s. Former political prisoners and dissidents were permitted to publish the political commentary journal *Glasnost.* And the government finally allowed radio broadcasts by the British Broadcasting Corporation and Voice of America, which had been jammed for generations.

Critical Overview

Tolstaya burst upon the Russian literary scene in 1987 when, according to S. Dalton-Brown in *Reference Guide to Russian Literature,* her first collection of stories, *On the Golden Porch,* sold out within one hour. Though Tolstaya has a limited body of published work, Dalton-Brown writes that many critics view her as the pre eminent Russian short-story writer today, showing "an extraordinarily high degree of craftsmanship." The American reception of her first collection in 1989 was enthusiastic, as was the response to the 1991 publication of *Sleepwalker in a Fog,* which includes the story "Night." Critics have favorably compared Tolstaya to other Russian writers as disparate as Vladimir Nabokov, Sasha Sokolov, Anton Chekhov, and Nikolai Gogol, to name but a few.

Anita Desai, writing for *The New Republic,* calls *Sleepwalker in a Fog* a "gorgeous, intricate, wildly rampaging Russian garden in summer bloom," although she considers "Night" one of the ' less ambitious stories" in the collection. Comparing *Sleepwalker in a Fog* with *On the Golden Porch,* a *Publishers Weekly* review notes that Tolstaya's "vision of human nature ... is darker, less forgiving" in the newer collection. But the review adds that the stories in *Sleepwalker in a Fog* overcome whatever limitations they have and are tales with a "universal resonance."

Despite any reservations the critics have about Tolstaya's stories, they are nearly always amazed by her energetic use of language and image. Desai calls Tolstaya's language "so fresh, so ebullient, so lacking in anything worn or borrowed," even though the author is said to be similar to various Russian writers. Desai goes on to praise "this virtuoso's facility with language [that] brings her again and again into the realm of poetry." Brigid O'Hara-Foster, reviewing *Sleepwalker in a Fog* in *Time,* comments that "Tolstaya so obviously loves her language ... that even in translation she carves indelible people who roam the imagination long after the book is put down." And while Dalton-Brown describes Tolstaya's style of writing as "ornamental" and "intensely visual," the critic denies that the result could be called "cluttered." According to Dalton-Brown, when Tolstaya's words and images are piled one on top of the other, she achieves "an almost incantatory effect," akin to music and poetry.

In spite of the luscious language Tolstaya uses, O'Hara-Foster holds that the author never lapses into sentimentality in her writing but "spikes it with the vinegar of circumstances that afflict her hapless dreamers." O'Hara-Foster points to "Night" as an example of this success, noting that Mamochka acts as the constant soldier, protecting Alexei, but never reveals the pain and sorrow she must be feeling.

Tolstaya's themes are varied, according to the critics, but nearly all agree that she has special affection for those who are unhappy, out of the ordinary, and living on the edges of Russian society. Desai notes that Tolstaya has a way with "the sad left-outs or left-behinds of even the closest communal living . . . [and] the grotesque and the unsightly," words that describe Mamochka and Alexei in "Night." Dalton-Brown remarks that any reader of Tolstaya will immediately recognize a central character who is usually of

"unprepossessing appearance, confused, trapped, unhappy, childlike, and alone," similar to Mamochka and Alexei.

As well, Dalton-Brown observes that the men and women who inhabit Tolstaya's stories are usually trying to flee their lives and to find a place where life is magical. Many are "attempting to escape from the dissatisfying quotidian, seeking the alchemical world that will turn dross into gold," comments Dalton-Brown. The critic believes that such qualities in Tolstaya's writing place her work in the tradition of magic realism, a literary style that combines fantastic or dreamlike elements with realistic settings and events. This style is usually associated with Latin-American writers, but Dalton-Brown argues that it is similar to Nikolai Gogol's realistic writing of the nineteenth century.

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Sanderson holds a master of fine arts degree in fiction writing and is an independent writer. In this essay, Sanderson argues that Alexei in Tatyana Tolstaya's "Night" is more than what he seems on the surface.

One of the most startling events in Tatyana Tolstaya's "Night," a tale filled with amazing and surprising images, is Alexei's apparently sudden interest in becoming a writer. Alexei is a middle-aged retarded man whose occupation as a builder of cardboard boxes keeps him and his mother, Mamochka, housed and fed—not a typical candidate to pursue the life of a writer.

Tempting as it may be to dismiss Alexei's unexpected declaration that "I'm going to be a writer" as the ramblings of a half-wit, Tolstaya does not disregard his comment. Tolstaya closes her story with Alexei responding to his frightening experience on the streets of Moscow by frantically demanding paper and pencil from his mother so he can write about what happened.

While there is only dangerous water waiting for anyone who attempts to imagine what goes on inside the head of a writer, Alexei's sudden declaration of literary ambition and his acting it out at the end of the story bear a striking resemblance to Tolstaya's similar declarations when she decided that she wanted to become a writer. Is Tolstaya, through Alexei, telling her readers about the lives of writers (and intellectuals) in Russia and about the life she herself chose after working nearly ten years at another career because she was "frustrated by the lack of good new literature," according to Marta Mestrovic's interview with the author in *Publishers Weekly?* In Tolstaya's own words, she decided at the age of thirty-two, "If I couldn't find the literature I wanted to read, I should write it myself."

Before rejecting Alexei's confident statements about becoming a writer, a close look at his character is necessary. Does this man with the mind of a child have any qualities, as Tolstaya has created him, that would serve him well as a writer? Surprisingly, the answer is yes.

Alexei is the possessor of an almost boundless imagination, something every good writer needs. When the story opens, he is just waking up and leaving the night world of dreams populated with dragons, dwarves, and crows. In fact, Tolstaya indicates that Alexei is the director or playwright of his dreams when she writes of Alexei's waking, "the nocturnal guests, gathering their ghostly, ambiguous props, have interrupted the play until next time."

Nothing is too extreme for Alexei's imagination. When Mamochka is dressing, he imagines her as a building. When she finishes putting on all of her clothes, she becomes an erected "palace." And from his point of view, the apartment building becomes a ship with Mamochka at the helm and "well-dressed travelers"—his neighbors—"laughing, exchanging remarks with one another on the deck." His mind

free-floats through the day, rejecting nothing as too absurd and making connections that most people do not, or cannot, make.

Even a trip from the bathroom to the kitchen is embellished by Alexei's rambling but fertile mind, which transforms the people he sees along the way into lions, rhinoceros, whales, and "the big-eyed, big-tailed Sea Girl." And Alexei's excursion into the dark Moscow streets, despite proving dangerous and frightening, allows him to imagine more bizarre creatures and events. He sees people as wolves standing in doorways and believes that if he can walk backwards, they will not harm him. Soon, he believes himself to be a wolf and behaves as a wolf might, pouncing and running after people.

With regard to his becoming a writer, another feature in Alexei's favor is that Tolstaya draws him as someone who creates and is proud of what he creates. Each day Alexei sits down at a table and works, gluing together cardboard boxes. Even though they are simple boxes, Alexei maintains a healthy degree of pride in his creations. He bemoans that fact that his mother forces him to sell his work to the pharmacy, and he decides on the afternoon of the story to hide two of the boxes under his mattress. He plans on sneaking them out later that night so he can admire them. Here he is taking the same ownership of his work that all writers must. Alexei loves his boxes so much that "he doesn't like to part with them."

In fact, Alexei's pride in his work is so developed that he has become incensed, even violent, over the carelessness people have shown toward his creations. In a remembered incident, Alexei sees his neighbors throwing the boxes away after they leave the pharmacy and becomes furious when he spies one of his boxes in the trash, ripped up and holding a cigarette butt. "A fearful black rage then filled Alexei Petrovich," and he cried out to his neighbors, "Who did this? Who dared do this?"

By closing the story with Alexei rushing to put his memories and thoughts down on paper before he forgets them, Tolstaya has emphasized her concern for what a writer and intellectual is and for how these people lived in Soviet Russia. In her *Publishers Weekly* interview, Tolstaya tells Mestrovic that intellectuals and writers had to separate themselves from the mainstream of Soviet society. They avoided conventional careers and took whatever jobs they could find. "You have no obligations.... Whether you work a lot or not at all, your salary is the same.... Only you yourself matter, your friends matter, good books matter," she says.

In a sense, Alexei reflects this sentiment. He is estranged from society because of who he is and how he behaves. He is cloistered in his apartment, working, and leaves only rarely; primarily, he lives in his mind. The outside world is a bit frightening, but on occasion he is compelled to visit it, such as when he ventures out during the night of the story. The original purpose of Alexei's trip to the outside world is to buy the ice cream his mother denied him earlier in the day, but he ultimately succeeds in discovering material for his writing. When he explores the streets, he is beaten up for behaving in an abnormal fashion—he takes off his clothes and begins running after people—but the result of the experience is that he now has fodder for his work. "He has understood the

world, understood the Rules .. . [and] hurriedly writes the newly acquired truth in big letters."

But it is also in the story's ending that Tolstaya's references to writers and writing become unclear— perhaps intentionally. When Alexei has his epiphany after exploring the night world, his writing is simply a single word, "night," written over and over again. Is this repeated word the shaky but exuberant foundation of a beginning writer's efforts? Or is it simply the product of a confused and childlike mind trying to make sense of what it does not understand?

There may be another way to look at the character of Alexei—that he is not serving as any kind of positive representation of a writer or intellectual but stands for what Tolstaya found boring and lacking in Russian letters and literature. For, in addition to noting that the lack of good literature prompted her to begin writing, Tolstaya also remembers in her *Publishers Weekly* interview that at about the time she graduated from college many Russian intellectuals began leaving the Soviet Union. "Life became more and more boring," she recalls, and "the percentage of uninteresting people increased." Maybe Alexei is similar to those people Tolstaya found boring, writing the same thing over and over again, with nothing new to say.

However, Alexei ultimately shares too many qualities with writers and intellectuals, and Tolstaya too obviously cares for this character for him to be considered an object of ridicule. She acknowledges her fascination with unconventional people in the *Publishers Weekly* interview, explaining that she is captivated by "everything I see as a deviation from the normal logic—old people, sclerotics, children, stupid people." In her characters, she wants to create "a typical person, always a bit crazy," and, in a sense, she has done that with Alexei and his mother. They have a very ordinary life, defined by waking up, getting breakfast, and earning money. But Alexei is special in a strange way; his dreams are a large part of who he is, and the line in his mind between the dream world and the real world is smudged. Thanks to Tolstaya's lush writing, both worlds contain fantastic images. If Alexei lives in a world where lions and rhinoceros line the path to the kitchen, can it be an impossible stretch for him to become a writer?

Source: Susan Sanderson, Critical Essay on "Night," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

Hart has degrees in literature and creative writing and focuses her published writing on literary themes. In this essay, Hart interprets Tolstaya's short story as a metaphor for the psychological challenges between the rational mind and the imagination of an writer.

Tatyana Tolstaya's "Night" was published in *Sleepwalker in a Fog,* a collection of short stories in which, according to Michiko Kakutani in her review published in the *New York Times,* all Tolstaya's characters "indulge in wistful daydreams." Backing up this view is David Plante, also writing a review in the *New York Times.* But Plante adds that "the dreams, and the characters lost like sleepwalkers in their own dreams" all have to do with the historical and moral reality of Russia. Plante is referring to the suppression, and sometimes persecution, of the people's voice by the Russian government. Although it might have been Tolstaya's intention to write this story as a statement against her government's attempts at suppression, it is also possible to put a more general spin on her story and to read "Night" as a metaphor for the struggle that a writer (any writer whether inside Russia or elsewhere) undergoes during the creative process. Instead of the writer's voice being suppressed by a government force, it can often be suppressed by the writer's own rational mind.

Looking at Tolstaya's story in this light, Alexei Petrovich, who is portrayed as a man with many difficulties dealing with the world outside of his head, could represent the writer. As a matter of fact, Alexei eventually admits that he wants to be a writer, thus strengthening this premise. For Alexei, the outside world is a place where it is "very hard to remember what's good and what's bad. They've set up and agreed upon written Rules that are awfully complicated." His comments relate to the feelings that people sometimes experience when they get caught in a writer's block—a state of mind that causes an inability to write. Writer's block can be caused by many different reasons. One of the reasons that the imagination might fail to create something viable on paper is that the writer becomes too conscious of the rules of writing and grammar. The writer then focuses on rules instead of letting the creative thoughts flow. Other reasons may be that the writer becomes overwhelmed by how an audience might respond to the work or gets too distracted about the details of finding a publisher. These elements represent the so-called outside world for the writer and correspond very nicely with the comments of Tolstaya's character Alexei Petrovich.

Inside Alexei's head is "the real world." It is there that "everything is allowed." This inside world can be likened to the imagination, where there are no rules, no preconceived ideas of what is good or bad. But life in the outside world is difficult for Alexei. To function in the outside world, he needs his "Mamochka," his mother. Mamochka represents order. Continuing with the concept of the metaphor, Mamochka could represent the rational mind that gives order to the imagination. Mamochka figures out the rules for Alexei, mends his ways, keeps him plodding through his day. She "knows everything, can do everything, gets in everywhere." She is all powerful in the outside world.

Alexei looks to his Mamochka to guide him, but he does not turn off his inside view of the world. Although he awakens to the day from his night dreams, he still has his daydreams or his own imaginative perceptions of the outside world. For instance, he refers to the part of the morning when people are stirring and getting ready for work as a time when "the morning ship has left the slip." In other words, although he relies on Mamochka, he does not turn off his own thought patterns. In this way, the writer, too, must learn to allow the imagination to offer its unique view of the world, creating metaphors like the ship leaving the slip. The imagination must also allow the rational mind to guide it, as Alexei allows his Mamochka to guide him. The imaginative part of the mind needs the language skills of the rational mind. It is through the process of the imagination working with the rational mind that a piece of writing is brought forth and completed. If the imagination of a writer were allowed full reign, the resulting writing would be gibberish— no grammatical rules, no syntax, no sense. If Alexei did not have his Mamochka, he too might represent not much more than gibberish. He must be constantly told what to do or he makes no sense.

Alexei asks, whimsically: "Why aren't you allowed to make your lips into a tube, cross your eyes to look at your mouth, and smell yourself?" Then he adds: "Let Mamochka turn her back." Tolstaya is implying here that when the rational mind has its figurative back turned, the imagination can break all the rules and try to make sense of its own nonsense. Alexei likes these moments of pure imagination, pure childish wonder, but he understands that they are good only for short moments (when Mamochka turns her back). If too much time passes and the imagination is allowed its own whimsical ways, chaos will ensue. The writer will find him or herself floundering in beautiful images but without any words or sentences building on the page. At this point in the story, Alexei again acknowledges Mamochka. She fixes everything for him. She unravels "all the tangles," destroys "all the labyrinths of this incomprehensible, unnavigable world." It is the rational mind that makes sense of all the beautiful images, puts the creative thoughts into words, writes the story.

It is in the subconscious mind, the source of imagination, that the emotions live. Alexei has a burst of emotions in one scene. He makes boxes that are eventually sold to a pharmacy. He loves the boxes and does not like to part with them "but Mamochka watches carefully and takes them away" when he is done. Later when Alexei sees that some of his boxes have been thrown into the trash, he goes into a fit of rage. Extending the metaphor here, Alexei's love of the boxes can be likened to the first drafts of a writer's work. Although not perfect, the imagination can become quite fond of first drafts, can become quite possessive of them. The writer must sometimes fight the emotional attachment when the rational part of the writer's mind begins editing. Throwing away first drafts can sometimes be quite painful.

But Mamochka can be too stifling. She sometimes suppresses Alexei. She makes him go with her to the pharmacy to deliver all the boxes he has made. This is unpleasant for him because he doesn't like giving the boxes away. In retaliation, Alexei turns more inward, into his private world where people "fly like white doves," where they "forget human speech." His mind goes "under the horizon" and finds new ways of seeing the outside world. He imagines that the sun and the moon are driven by huge conveyor

belts, that the day has white wings that it has folded, bringing on the night. His imagination is offering him poetic metaphors. He is thinking in purely creative ways. When he sees an ice cream stand, he can think of nothing else but the "sweet, needlelike cold." He is craving ice cream, "ooh, how he wants ice cream." But Momochka denies him the treat. She restricts his cravings, his impulses.

Shortly after this scene, Alexei revolts. He wanders into the outside world on his own when Momochka, once again, has her back turned. His craving for ice cream is so strong that he does not adhere to his own advice that Momochka is his "guiding star." He steals money from a neighbor and runs out to the street, hoping to find his way to the ice cream stand. But it is dark. With his emotions flaring like a fire gone wild, he becomes lost, confused. "Where's Mamochka?" His imagination turns on him. He sees wolves standing in doorways. Without Mamochka there to control him, he acts foolishly, unbuttoning his clothes in an attempt to scare the wolves away. Without the rules there to protect him, he is beaten.

This scene is a metaphor for the writer and the writing process in that it shows how if the imagination of the writer is unchecked and allowed to run wild, the story that the writer is attempting to create will lose all form. It will lose its direction. The reader will be left in the dark, will become lost, confused. If the writer sends the story out into the world without the "guiding star" of the rational mind, the story will be torn to shreds, rejected, beaten to a pulp. "Little one, so little, alone, you got lost on the street, you came into this world by mistake." That's how the imagination might feel if it tried, all on its own, to create a story without the principles of language, without the benefit of knowing and understanding the rules.

But just when all seems hopeless, when all the paths seem to "lead into a deep swamp," there is Mamochka, running, gasping, reaching out for Alexei. She too had felt lost without her son. She is sobbing. The rational mind is equally lost without the imagination. If the imagination is too heavily suppressed, a writer's block can ensue. The rational mind might know all the rules, but it cannot create anything without the imagination. The rational mind needs the imagination as much as the imagination needs it.

So "Mamochka leads Alexei Petrovich by the reins into a warm den, into a soft nest, under a white wing." She welcomes her son home, washes his face, nurtures him with food. It is at this moment that Alexei has an epiphany. He understands that he really does need Mamochka. He understands that there is a need for rules. He has "grasped the laws of connection of millions of snatches and of odd bits and pieces!" He remembers that he wants to be a writer. He is renewed. In this moment of ecstasy, he asks his mother for a piece of paper and a pencil. He is ready to write.

Alexei writes. It is only one word, but to him it explains everything. It is the beginning, the middle, and the end of the story. It is the title, the theme, and the metaphor. It is the word "Night," written over and over again. With this word, Alexei has freed his block.

It is anyone's guess whether this extended metaphor is what Tolstaya intended with her story. Her intended metaphor could have indeed been about the politics of Russia in reference to its suppression of its writers. Or she might have intended an entirely different meaning, one of which only she is aware. The beauty of a well-crafted story, one that allows the freedom of the imagination to blossom while maintaining a nurturing relationship with the rational restraints of rules and form, is that it allows the imagination of the reader to fill in the spaces that the form has cleverly left empty. There are many cleverly left empty spaces in Tolstaya's story into which every reader's imagination can climb.

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on "Night," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #3

Brent has a Ph.D. in American culture, specializing in film studies, from the University of Michigan. She is a freelance writer and teaches courses in the history of American cinema. In the following essay, Brent discusses figurative and descriptive language in Tolstaya's short story.

Tolstaya's "Night" records the internal subjective impressions of a mentally retarded adult, Alexei Petrovich, over the course of one particular day. These impressions are expressed through vivid language describing the smells, tastes, sounds, and physical sensations that texture Alexei's day. Tolstaya also uses figurative language in describing through simile and metaphor Alexei's experience of the world around him.

Central to Alexei's perceptions throughout the day are a variety of sounds emanating from his Mamochka, the neighbors in his apartment building, the outdoors, and his own body. The story begins, "In the mornings Alexei Petrovich's mama yawns loud and long." The loudness of Mamochka symbolizes Alexei's perception of her as expansive and all-powerful, the dominant force in his life. He observes, "Mamochka is so big, loud, and spacious, and Alexei Petrovich is so little." His perception of their difference in size is clearly symbolic because she is an eighty-year-old woman and he is a grown man. The sounds of Mamochka's body provide Alexei with feelings of comfort and safety because they are familiar rituals that dominate his small world. Mamochka's loudness and the noises emitting from her body are part of her morning ritual in which she "honks into a handkerchief." In the afternoon, when she falls asleep, Alexei notes that Mamochka is "snoring, her cheeks gurgle, she whistles: pssshhew-ew-ew."

Alexei also delights in the sounds of his own body although Mamochka frequently "shhhh's" him, indicating that his noises are inappropriate and childish. Hearing Mamochka carry out her morning ritual, Alexei wonders, "Can I get up already, or is it early?" Then he tells himself, "Don't squawk." This reminder is clearly based on scoldings he has received in the past for squawking too early in the morning. Alexei also makes loud sounds when he is happy. When Mamochka reads him a poem that he loves, "He laughs heartily, baring his yellow teeth; happy, he stamps his foot." As she continues to read the poem, Alexei thinks, "Very good," adding to the line, "First like a beast she'll howl and cry," by providing his own sound effects, "This is how she'll howl: oo-oooooo!" To this Mamochka responds, "Shhh, sshhh, Alexei, calm down!" Alexei is also known to make inappropriate sounds if he is forced to ride in the elevator, which frightens him. The narrator explains, "You can't close Alexei in an elevator: he'll begin to flail and squeal like a rabbit." Alexei's childishness is indicated by the comparison of the noises he makes to those of animals, such as a rabbit and a beast.

Alexei also notices many of the sounds created by his neighbors in the apartment building. In the morning, he can hear that "Everyone is already awake in the apartment, everyone's stirring, all the Men and Women have started talking. They slam doors, burble water, jingle on the other side of the wall." He notes that the neighbors in the hallway preparing to leave for the day are "noisily checking for their keys, coin purses."

But he also knows that the sounds of the neighbors are sometimes threatening and disapproving. In the communal bathroom, Alexei must be careful not to make a mess, "or else the neighbors will yell again." In the communal kitchen, Alexei perceives the "grumbling" of the old ladies at the stove as an expression of evil intent; he imagines they are witches who, as they are "stewing poison in pots ... add the roots of terrible plants" and "follow Alexei Petrovich with bad looks." Alexei turns to his Mamochka in fear of the grumbling old ladies and thinks, "Mamochka! Don't let them hurt me!"

After Alexei steals the money from his neighbor's table and runs outside to buy himself ice cream, the noises he makes, as well as the noises he hears, express his fear and anxiety as well as his excitement in this adventure. When he takes the money from the table, he "grabs, jingles, knocks things over, runs, slams the door, breathes loud and fast, trips." His joy in his accomplishment is expressed through his description of the sounds of the money in his pocket: "He has money! Aha!... Clink clink clink clink—the coins in his pocket." But his anxiety and guilt about stealing the money are expressed by his fear of being caught. He imagines that everyone around him on the street is pointing and yelling, "He took the money!'" He imagines dogs sent to chase after him and fire engines blaring in pursuit. When he tries to "trick" the people on the street, walking backwards and taking off his clothes, he hears the women who walk past "snort" at him. Alexei responds with his own sounds, meant to intimidate them: he imagines that he is a wolf, rushing at them with "A cry. A-a-a-a!" Rather than frightening them, however, his howl becomes an expression of fear: after he is attacked and beaten by several men, "Alexei Petrovich cries with a loud howl, raising his disfigured face to the stars." Through his "howl" like a wolf, Alexei's noises once again associate him with animals.

While the familiar sounds of Mamochka are a comfort to Alexei, the silence that follows the beating he receives on the street is indicative of how alone he feels in the world without her to protect him; he thinks, "Mamochka, Mamochka, where are you? Mamochka, the road is black, the voices are silent, the paths lead into a deep swamp." Alexei responds to the silence by crying out, as the narration states, "Mamochka, your child is crying, dying, your only one." Once Mamochka has found him and taken him back to the safety of home, the comfort she provides is indicated by the sound of the grandfather clock ticking, which is a peaceful sound to Alexei's ears. The comfort provided by the grandfather clock symbolizes Alexei's association of the sounds of home with the familiarity of family.

In addition to sounds, Alexei is keenly aware of the taste and smell of a variety of foods. He delights in the smell and taste of things, such as coffee. When Mamochka pours the morning coffee, he thinks, "Coffee has a Smell. You drink it—and the smell goes over you. Why aren't you allowed to make your lips into a tube, cross your eyes to look at your mouth, and smell yourself?" When he sees people on the street buying ice cream, Alexei wishes he could have "a frosty, crunchy goblet" and recalls with envy the "sweet, needlelike cold" of the ice cream. His sense of taste has strong associations with the nurturing Mamochka provides him. When Mamochka finds him and brings him home again, the comfort and safety at home is experienced as the taste of "delicious hot milk," symbolic of maternal nurturing, and the "runny" soft-boiled egg that she gives him.

Alexei is also aware of the smell of non-food items, which most people would probably not think of as enjoyable. He thinks of paper money as "a little yellow piece of paper that smells like bread." He even loves the smell of the glue used for making boxes; he hides the newly made boxes in his bed and "At night he'll take them out and sniff them. How the glue smells! Soft, sour, muffled." When he steals the money and goes outside by himself, he notes that in the night "There's a smell." His ambivalent feelings about women, whom he perceives as both attractive and threatening, are also experienced through his sense of smell; he thinks of women as "very unsettling" when they "walk by —smelling like they do." Other smells Alexei associates with fear: while the men on the street are hitting him, he observes, "Men smell of Tobacco."

Alexei is also sensitive to the physical sensation of touch that textures his day. As he lies awake in bed early in the morning, "a breeze sweetly fans Alexei Petrovich's bald spot, the newly grown bristle on his cheeks pricks his palm." That these sensations are enjoyable to Alexei is indicated by the description of the breeze as a "sweet" sensation. When Mamochka brings him home after his frightening adventure, he is comforted by the feel of the "warm den" of his home.

In addition to descriptive language expressive of sensory perceptions, Tolstaya makes use of several key metaphors to describe Alexei's experience of the world around him. The powerful and sturdy presence of Mamochka in his life is indicated by the comparison of her process of getting dressed to the construction of a "majestic building." Her legs, as she pulls on her stockings, are compared to the columns that support a building. The front of her body is further supported by a girdle, which is compared to the frame of a building, as she "hoists a linen frame with fifteen buttons onto her monstrous breast." The front of her body is compared to the "facade," or front of a building, which she conceals "under a white, pleated dickey." Finally, the back of her body is compared to the back stairs and emergency exits of a building, which she covers with a "sturdy dark blue jacket." At the end of the day, Mamochka's process of undressing is compared to the demolition of a building, as she "demolishes her daytime corpus."

A metaphor that runs throughout the story compares the day to a ship at sea: "The morning ship has left the slip, it cuts through the blue water, the sails fill with wind, the well-dressed travelers, laughing, exchange remarks with one another on the deck." For Alexei, Mamochka represents the captain of the ship, guiding him through the waters of life: "What shores lie ahead? Mamochka is at the wheel, Mamochka is on the captain's bridge, from the crow's nest Mamochka looks into the shining ripples." Alexei feels safe and secure under the guiding hand of Mamochka's command: "how open the horizons become, how reliable a voyage with an experienced pilot." When Mamochka explains to Alexei how to eat his breakfast, he thinks of her as a "guiding star" who directs him through the "unnavigable world." Mamochka thus provides Alexei with clearly specified directions for navigating his way through the day: "The old colored maps unrolled, the route is drawn in with a red dotted line." In addition, she warns him against the potential dangers he may encounter throughout the day: "all the dangers are marked with bright, clear pictures: there's the dread lion, and on this shore—a rhinoceros; here a whale spouts a toy like fountain."

The biggest danger against which she warns him, however, is the threat of women—particularly the attractive woman who lives in their apartment building, "the most dangerous creature, the big-eyed, big-tailed Sea Girl, slippery, malicious, alluring." Tolstaya continues this extended metaphor of the Sea Girl in making a pun that compares the fishnet stockings of the woman to "nets" laid out to "catch" a fish (Alexei): "her Leg is stuck out, her nets laid—don't you want to be caught, eh?" The association of the threat of women as creatures of the sea is continued when Alexei recalls being on vacation at the beach and attempting to approach an attractive woman who cruelly insults him.

Finally, Mamochka is compared to a bird, who, at the end of the day, rescues Alexei from the outside world and brings him safely home "into a soft nest, under a white wing."

Through descriptive language, expressing a variety of sensory perceptions and extended metaphors, Tolstaya effectively conveys the unique way in which Alexei Petrovich experiences his very small world as a vast universe of pleasurable sensations and potential dangers, through all of which Mamochka provides the stability, guidance, and comfort on which Alexei depends to make his way through life.

Source: Liz Brent, Critical Essay on "Night," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Topics for Further Study

Most of the people who live in Mamochka and Alexei's communal apartment building seem to have jobs that they go to each morning. However, though they are earning money, their living conditions are less than what many in the United States might consider appropriate and comfortable. Develop a profile of a typical Soviet family and their life in 1980s: discuss such things as the schools, the types of jobs and the average worker's salary, the size of the average apartment, and typical living conditions.

In the story, Alexei and Mamochka walk through Pushkin Square, named for the Russian writer Aleksandr Pushkin. Write a short biography of Pushkin. When and where did he live? What did he write about? Why is a square named after him?

Create a timeline of Russian history from the early 1900s to the 1990s. For three important dates in Russian history, compare what was happening in the United States at the same time.

"Night" shows readers only one day in Alexei and Mamochka's life. Create a "prologue" and an "epilogue" toTolstaya's story: imagine Alexei and Mamochka's life before the day outlined in "Night" as well as what happens to the two after Alexei's night out in the streets, and write about both. Have they always lived in this apartment? What happened to the rest of their family? Does Alexei continue writing?

Compare and Contrast

1980s: Gorbachev announces to the Soviet Communist Party in 1987 that it is time to inaugurate competitive elections with multiple-party ballots, replacing the no-choice ballots in place since the 1920s.

Today: Vladimir Putin, a member of the Unity Party, is the Russian president. The Russian people have enjoyed a full decade of open elections in which the Communist Party candidates could lose.

1980s: Relations between the United States and the Soviet Union are unfriendly. The United States condemns the Soviet crackdown against Polish dissidents and denounces the Soviet role in the shooting down of a South Korean civilian aircraft over its airspace.

Today: Relations between Russia and the United States have improved considerably since the 1980s and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. U.S. President George W. Bush, during a visit with Russian President Putin, announces that the United States no longer considers Russia its enemy.

1980s: The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, with fifteen republics including Russia, is the largest country in the world, covering approximately one-sixth of the world's land area.

Today: The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics has been dissolved for a decade. The individual republics, including Russia, have become autonomous nations, with varying degrees of political and economic success. Russia is now the largest country in the world, covering more than one-ninth of the world's land area.

1980s: The Soviet government determines what can be legally published or performed. However, Soviet writers and intellectuals are increasingly ignoring these restrictions. The ban on the works of Russian literary luminaries, such as Boris Pasternak and Vladimir Nabokov, is lifted in the late 1980s.

Today: The Soviet Writer's Union, which controlled literature during the communist period, has ceased to exist. This has meant a loss of state subsidies for literary magazines, and many publications are struggling to cope with the new realities of the marketplace.

What Do I Read Next?

In his *Siberian Dawn: A Journey across the New Russia,* Jeffrey Taylor recounts the eight-thousand-mile trip he took in 1993 from Siberia to Poland as a young man with a huge sense of adventure but very little money. The memoir, published in 1999, gives an up-close and personal account of post-communist Soviet states not long after the demise of the Soviet Union.

Vladimir Nabokov is one of the modern Russian authors Tolstaya mentions as an influence on her writing. The sixty-five stories collected in *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov,* published in 1995, were written by Nabokov between the early 1920s and the mid-1950s. He is best known to American audiences for his controversial novel *Lolita.*

Many critics acknowledge the similarities between Tolstaya and another young Russian author, Sasha Sokolov. In 1988, Sokolov published *A School for Fools,* a novel about childhood and adult memories. In 1990, he published another novel, *Astrophobia,* constructed as a memoir of a man imprisoned for an assassination attempt against the twentieth-century Russian leader Leonid Brezhnev and set in 2044.

Tolstaya's first collection of stories published outside of Russia was *On the Golden Porch.* The 1990 collection of thirteen stories contains stories similar to those in *Sleepwalker in a Fog* (in which "Night" appears); the earlier collection is filled with Russians living on the edge of society and sanity.

Further Study

Freeland, Chrystia, *Sale of the Century: Russia's Wild Ride from Communism to Capitalism,* Times Books, 2000.

Former Moscow bureau chief for the *Financial Times,* Chrystia Freeland gives a first-hand view of the change in Russian society since the fall of the Soviet Union. Through many first-person accounts, Freeland takes a close look at a nation of sometimes troubling extremes.

Goscilo, Helen, *The Explosive World of Tatyana N. Tolstaya's Fiction,* M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 1996.

Goscilo examines how Tolstaya merges myth, children's games, folklore, and songs into the text of her fiction.

Goscilo, Helen, and Byron Lindsey, eds., *Glasnost: An Anthology of Russian Literature under Gorbachev,* Ardis Publishers, 1990.

The editors have brought together the work of writers representative of the literary renaissance during the final three years of the Soviet Union. This anthology, the largest collection of works published during that period, includes Tatyana Tolstaya's "Night."

Nabokov, Vladimir, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited,* Vintage Books, 1989.

Originally published in 1966, this book is Nabokov's recounting of his years at a prestigious school in Russia, offering many insights into his controversial life. The Soviets banned his work until the mid-1980s because of Nabokov's outspoken criticism of the communists.

Remnick, David, *Lenin's Tomb: The Last Days of the Soviet Empire,* Vintage Books reprint edition, 1994.

David Remnick covered the Soviet Union for the *Washington Post* during the communist regime's final days. Through his extensive travels across the Soviet Union, combined with numerous interviews, Remnick tells a story that goes beyond chronicling the great power's change in economic systems.

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Mestrovic, Marta, "Tatyana Tolstaya: In Her Short Stories, Leo Tolstoy's Great Grandniece Writes of Russians Who Are 'Always a Bit Crazy,'" in *Publishers Weekly,* Vol. 239, No. 1, January 1, 1992, pp. 37-38.

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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

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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 Short Stories for Students (SSfS) 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, SSfS 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 SSfS 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 SSfS 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 SSfS 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 SSfS 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

SSfS 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 Short Stories 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 SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS 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 Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories 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 SSfS 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.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

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

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories 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 SSfS, 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 Short Stories 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 SSfS, 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 Short Stories 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, Short Stories for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535