Russian Stories: A Dual-Language Book Study Guide

Russian Stories: A Dual-Language Book

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The Stationmaster by Alexander Pushkin

The Stationmaster by Alexander Pushkin Summary

The story opens with a general statement of the plight of the stationmaster c. 1816 - 1830; the stationmaster of the time organizes stagecoach traffic and lives with his family in the same structure used as an office. Chronic shortages of horses and coaches, as well as difficulty scheduling traffic and passage, are always blamed on the stationmaster though in fact he has little control over them. The stationmaster must at all times defer to rank of privilege, such as military and political dignitaries, rather than rank of precedence—such that booking passage early is no guarantee of timely travel. The mention of a stationmaster's requisite deference foreshadows later events. The narrator, nearly entirely effaced and probably a government courier, meets one such stationmaster, Simeon Vyrin, in 1816. Vyrin's home features a pictorial presentation of the prodigal son, with verses below in German. The reference to the Biblical prodigal son foreshadows the remaining events in the story. Vyrin's young daughter Avdotya "Dounia" Simeonovna is beautiful and catches the eye of the narrator. Before departing, the narrator steals from Douania a kiss; Douania is obviously flirtatious and adventurous.

Some years later the narrator again visits the station and finds it much diminished. Vyrin is still there but Douania is not. The stationmaster relates how a few years previously a hussar, Captain Minsky, was traveling through the town and had feigned an illness to pass time in Douania's care. After several days Minsky had departed, offering Douania a ride to mass but instead kidnapping her away to Petersburg. Vyrin had searched until locating Minsky in Petersburg but was rebuffed in his attempts to recover Douania. Thus he barges in on Minsky sitting with Douania; his daughter feints and Minsky ejects Vyrin brusquely whereupon Vyrin returns to his duties as stationmaster in his small town. Some more years later the narrator again visits the station and discovers Vyrin has died, reputedly from alcoholism. A local boy takes the narrator to the graveside and mentions how, months previously, a fine lady with three children had visited the town, learned of Vyrin's death, visited his grave, and collapsed in tears upon it. After recovering she visited with the village priest, made several monetary donations, and departed.

The Stationmaster by Alexander Pushkin Analysis

The narrative construction is intriguing as the opening vituperation of stationmasters as a class is followed by quite the reverse portrayal of a stationmaster as an individual. The narrator's mention of, and indeed the existence of, the various paintings depicting the Biblical Prodigal Son are a reference to the Christian New Testament parable found in Luke 15:11-32. In the story, the prodigal son takes his inheritance early, lives alone and riotously, falls into poverty, and eventually returns home penitent where he receives a joyous welcome. In some salient points the story repeats the parable, but with notable differences. The daughter is flirtatious and indeed kisses the narrator after only a few

hours' acquaintance. She is therefore poised to live riotously, but in fact does not do so. True, she absconds with a hussar but thereafter appears to do very well for herself and raises her station materially. Clearly the returning lady had been Douania, returned as the metaphorical prodigal daughter. Unfortunately, unlike the Biblical story, her return is untimely and poor Vyrin has already gone to his grave. From the narrator's perspective, however, knowing that the daughter had returned and mourned her father was sufficient closure to the tale. The insinuation that stationmasters were frequently beaten or whipped by important customers is intriguing in light of Vyrin's fear that the hussar might indeed whip him. The story is said by the editor to be the least linguistically complex in the collection.

The Nose by Nikolay Gogol

The Nose by Nikolay Gogol Summary

Ivan Yakovlevich is a barber and is considered something of an artisan. He lives with his wife Praskovya Osipovna in the same building in which his shop is located. A habitual drunkard, Ivan wakes one morning and asks his wife for bread and onions. She sets down a fresh loaf and he readies his onions and salt. Cutting into a fresh loaf, Ivan discovers a foreign object embedded in the bread and quickly determines that it is a human nose. His wife accuses him of accidentally severing it while shaving someone drunk—Ivan acknowledges but doubts the possibility, although he recognizes the nose as having once belonged to Collegiate Assessor Kovalyov, a regular customer. Ivan wraps the nose in cloth and walks about the town, looking for a likely place to dispose of it and fearing imminent arrest. He finally throws the nose into a river but is seen by a policeman.

Collegiate Assessor Platon Kovalyov usually refers to himself as Major to garner as much prestige as possible. He takes offense easily and is entirely concerned with being in the company of attractive women. He awakens in the morning and discovers to his horror that his nose is missing and his face has a blank, flat space. The fastidious Kovalyov is unsure of how to proceed and so dresses as normal and walks into town, hiding his face behind a handkerchief. He is astonished to see his nose, dressed in a fabulous uniform, get out of a coach, shout to the driver, and make a social call. Kovalyov follows his nose into a cathedral and accosts it, demanding that it know its place. The nose declares its own existence and then ignores Kovalyov. Kovalyov loses sight of his nose and then travels to a newspaper and attempts to place an advertisement offering a reward for the return of his nose. The loquacious clerk refuses to take the advertisement. Kovalyov then travels to the police but the police inspector finds the matter uninteresting and dismisses Kovalyov's complaint.

Kovalyov returns home in despair and wonders how he has lost his nose, finally deciding one of his paramours must have cursed him. But then a policeman arrives and announces that the nose has been found. The policeman explains that the nose had been apprehended trying to leave town and that Ivan has been arrested. The policeman then returns the nose and departs. Kovalyov attempts to reaffix the nose but fails, so he summons a doctor. The doctor says it can't be reattached but offers to purchase it as a medical specimen—Kovalyov declines. Over the next weeks wild rumors about Kovalyov's nose circulate throughout the town. Then one day Kovalyov awakens and discovers his nose once again in its rightful place. Later that day Ivan shaves Kovalyov, taking extra precautions around his nose. Over the next hours and days Kovalyov frequently checks in mirrors, makes public appearances, and becomes accustomed to once again having his nose on his face. The effaced narrator then speculates on the nature of such ridiculous tales as Kovalyov's nose and concludes they have no benefit whatsoever.

The Nose by Nikolay Gogol Analysis

The nose in the satire is clearly allegorical and the narrative cannot be interpreted literally. Kovalyov is a vain and proud man, much given to womanizing and posturing. The loss of his nose leaves him disgraced, confused, and embarrassed. He even goes so far as to wish he had lost instead a leg or arm, because such a loss would not so much impact his over-inflated ego. Even after his nose is returned to him it remains useless because he cannot reattach it. In time, it reattaches itself and Kovalyov is restored to his former self. In this sense the nose represents something metaphysical such as pride or self-worth. The story's whimsical portrayal of the nose's brief but successful independent existence is humorous, compelling, and exceptional. No rationale is offered to explain how the nose could parade in public as a uniformed public servant without drawing undue attention—and this lack is perhaps the most endearing element of the tale. Particularly humorous is the fact that the nose has instantly attained a higher rank than Kovalyov himself. His subsequent appeals to the nose to know its own station are therefore ironic. The unreliable narrator notes that several events in the story are audacious and improbable, and the story is often interpreted as an early example of magical realism. Alternately, Kovalyov's nose can be interpreted as a substitute penis, the story referencing a castration complex.

A Living Relic by Ivan Turgenev

A Living Relic by Ivan Turgenev Summary

The wealthy narrator, Piotr Petrovitch, and his huntsman Yermolaï hunt grouse in the rain. The weather is so severe that they shelter under a tree and bemoan the conditions before seeking shelter in a distant building that Yermolaï knows about; the building apparently belongs to Piotr's mother though he was previously unaware of it. After spending a pleasant night Piotr wanders around the village and looks into a hut where beehives are over wintered. A wizened and crippled figure calls out to him—it is Lukerya, who was once the dancing leader at his mother's estate and, about fourteen years previous was considered a great and ravishing beauty. Now she is withered and ugly, her legs and one arm useless and her face dried out and shriveled.

Lukerya explains that a few years after Piotr had gone off to college, she had become betrothed to Vassily Polyakov. Before the wedding, however, she had heard a beautiful birdsong and, turning to see the bird, fell. The fall broke something inside of her and she stopped eating and gradually deteriorated. Polyakov married another woman and Lukerya returned home—to this village—where she is cared for. Piotr exclaims horror, but Lukerya insists she is happy. She is unable to sin and therefore sinless, she hears, smells, and sees all, retains use of one arm, is attended to, and has trained herself to not think and to not remember. Thus, the days pass quickly and easily. Lukerya expounds on the wonders of nature that she has seen and on how many prayers she has recited. Piotr suggests he will transport her to a hospital but she reviles at medical men. Lukerya also says she dreams good dreams and still remembers how to sing, albeit quietly.

As the halting conversation continues through moments of profound silence, Piotr sees in Lukerya vestiges of her former beauty. She then tells him of her dreams; in them she readies herself for marriage to Polyakov but instead of wearing a cornflower tiara she wears the moon, and instead of being received by Polyakov she is received by Jesus Christ, leaving her illness behind. In another dream her dead parents return and bow to her, explaining that her suffering is so great that not only has she made herself sinless but also she has expiated their sins in the afterlife. In another dream she meets her own death, asks to be taken along, and is refused for the present.

When Piotr praises her patients she demurs, citing other examples of individuals more patient still. She recalls her once-glorious hair and, when Piotr asks again if there is nothing he can do for her, she asks him to ask his mother to lower the rent in the area so that the local peasants will not have to work so hard. Back in town, Piotr learns that the townsfolk refer to Lukerya as a living relic, and they widely assume that God struck her for her sins. Yet they find her a gentle soul now. A few weeks later Piotr hears that Lukerya has died, hearing the tolling of heavenly bells.

A Living Relic by Ivan Turgenev Analysis

The story was originally published in 1872 within a collection of short stories featuring hunting themes. Turgenev came from a wealthy family with an abusive mother, and learned only late in life that his mother's reach severely impacted the local peasants (serfs, actually), as hinted at in this story. Note how the narrator is primarily an uncommitted observer of other people—a hallmark of the Russian Realist tradition. Piotr is in his mid thirties, and his mother is politically significant. He is presumably heir to her considerable fortune though such is not certain. Lukerya's malady appears to be a digestive disorder leading to slow starvation but the specific diagnosis is not given. Piotr is obviously very disturbed by Lukerya's ability to accept her terrible fate. While Piotr is heartbroken by her condition, Lukerya accepts it—he is saddened but she is happy because of her inability to sin. Lukerya dies peacefully on a given day, her death not taking her by surprise because she has dreamed it in advance. The unreal—perhaps hyper-real—elements of Lukerya's dreams are atypical of the stories in the collection. The story is a delightful tale of personal enlightenment and features excellent dialogue and characterization.

Bobok by Fyodor Dostoevsky

Bobok by Fyodor Dostoevsky Summary

The narrator, Ivan Ivanovitch, is a writer who has failed in literature and instead makes a living by doing translations from French, writing advertising copy, and publishing tracts on how to succeed with women. Lately, Ivan's work has become increasingly erratic and confusing. Ivan is a confirmed consumer of alcohol and has sat for a painting by a so-called realist painter. One day Ivan goes for a rather aimless walk and ends up attending the funeral of a distant relative—he notes the smell of death and the throngs of people in the churchyard who are there attending multiple funerals, and then goes to a restaurant and eats. He then acts as a pallbearer and after the internment sits on a tombstone philosophizing as the cemetery grounds empty of people. He slowly falls into a funk and then begins to hear voices.

Ivan realizes he is overhearing the dead speaking to each other. Some play cards, others argue about unpaid bills and inheritances, while others discuss whether station in life somehow equates to station in death—or if all are equal in sin and corruption. Others exchange juicy gossip while some plaintively long for another taste of life. Some wish the so-called new arrivals would chime in, bringing new conversation—sometimes the newly dead do not speak for days or even a week. As time passes, however, the newly dead begin to become aware and to speak up. As several were buried nearly at once, the conversation becomes chaotic. One new arrival is a respected gentleman, and yet another new arrival exposes him as an embezzler and a predator. Another new arrival wonders how it is possible that the corpses speak to each other. Speech gradually fades away, however, and long-time residents rarely can be roused from their deep slumbers and even then mostly speak gibberish. Conscious life thus continues after physical death by inertia, until complete decomposition unmakes consciousness, little by little. After perhaps six months, nothing remains. The new arrival then wonders about the stench of decomposition pervading the area; someone surmises that in fact it is the metaphysical stench of moral decay.

The various consciousnesses all decide that for the remaining months they will conduct a social experiment and cast off all shame and refuse to tell lies. They reason that while shame and lies are required on the surface, they are not underground. However, pretensions of class still are exercised among some and the proposed experiment breaks down into personal jabs and improper suggestions. And then Ivan sneezes and the sound causes all of the voices of the dead to stop immediately. Ivan listens for some time but hears nothing, and determines from thenceforth to always try to hear the dead.

Bobok by Fyodor Dostoevsky Analysis

A bobok is a bean, or small thing, and is the word that the oldest still-speaking corpse says from time to time indicating a realization of the insignificance of personality; this

echoes closely the narrators rambling introduction during which he declaims the significance of most of life. During the early stages of the story one can easily surmise the narrator is himself a fresh corpse, simply unaware of his new situation—as are, apparently, some of the other new arrivals. However, the story's ending makes it clear that this is not the case, and that the narrator has been vouchsafed a rare vision of death. The graveyard banter that he overhears is complex, compelling, and sometimes fairly lewd. While the dead seem to be relatively free from shame they still yearn for worldly pleasures and are captured by worldly desires. The simplest form of this is the person who repeatedly desires another taste of life; a more subtle form of this is the child-predator who wants the young girl to disrobe. Obviously, she cannot as a buried corpse disrobe in any but the metaphysical sense of verbally agreeing to disrobe, but the lewd predator is still unable to resist demanding the action.

Much of the dead are concerned with their immediate society—who is buried where, and who brings fresh news of the living. They seem singularly unperturbed by their state of being dead, even though they realize their consciousnesses are fairly transient. Instead, they argue about what a new society among the dead could, and perhaps should, be like, agreeing that it should be free of shame and lies. And yet the proud aristocrats are not willing to give up their privilege and rank, even though it is entirely meaningless in death. This refusal of egalitarianism appears to short-circuit the talk of a new society in favor of more lewd discussion. Note how the story metaphorically deals with real society, or the society of the living. The few months prior to fading away can easily be equated to normal life ending in senescence. In this sense the Vale of Jehoshaphat is in fact mortal life and Ivan has been granted an alternative perception of daily experience.

The Three Hermits by Leo Tolstoy

The Three Hermits by Leo Tolstoy Summary

A bishop is making a passage on a ship and overhears another passenger telling a group of men about a passing island. Upon the island three old hermits live a life meant to cleanse their souls. The man recalls how the hermits helped him repair his boat once after an accident, and avows that the hermits speak little but are quite willing to help. The bishop asks the captain if he can visit the island. The captain tries to dissuade the bishop, but then anchors and has the bishop rowed ashore. The bishop meets the three hermits who show him respect. They speak about religious things, and the hermits explain that their prayers are simple—while gazing heavenward they join hands and say, "'Three are ye, three are we, have mercy upon us'" (p.). The bishop corrects them in the manner of prayer, reciting for them the Lord's Prayer, and causing them to accept it by memorization. The task takes many hours but is completed. The bishop returns to the ship and the ship sails away. Some hours later the bishop sees the three hermits, holding hands, skimming across the water toward the ship. The sight causes much consternation among the crew and passengers. The hermits call out to the bishop, indicating that they had forgotten a little of the Lord's Prayer, and then become confused about the exact ordering. They have sought him out to relearn the words. The bishop exclaims that their own simple prayer is sufficient, that he cannot teach them anything, and asks them to pray for him and other sinners. He then bows to the hermits and they glide away, back to their island. A miraculous light shines upon the spot until daybreak.

The Three Hermits by Leo Tolstoy Analysis

The story is about a somewhat presumptuous bishop that decides to teach three hermits the 'correct' method of prayer. In the end the bishop realizes the men are holy and begs to be forgiven of his sins. The hermit's prayer is simple and reflects their attempt to mirror godlike behavior. Their complete humility is indicated by their disavowal of any special knowledge of how to serve God. Rather than seeing the deeper significance, the bishop presumes to do good and rigorously teaches the Lord's Prayer, until the three aged men can recite it perfectly. However, they forget the exact words and pursue the bishop through miraculous means. Whereupon the good bishop realizes his fundamental mistake; the tables turned, the bishop asks the hermits for forgiveness and asks them to prayer for his own soul.

The Clothesmender by Nikolay Leskov

The Clothesmender by Nikolay Leskov Summary

The narrator is staying in Moscow and lamenting the inadequate services of the local hotel. An associate tells him of a room that is available, and states that not only is the lodging cheap and good but that it includes free and excellent repair or alteration of clothing. The two men then proceed to the house of Vasily Konych, oddly known widely as the maître tailleur Lepoutant. The narrator agrees to switch lodgings and on the way to the new house inquires about Lepoutant, wondering if he is French—his associate insists that Lepoutant is wholly Russian. Arriving at the house, the narrator sees the signage in French but again his associate insists that Lepoutant is wholly Russian. The narrator finds the lodging suitable and rents a room. Over the next weeks he grows friendly with Lepoutant and finally the question of his odd name come up.

Lepoutant explains at some length his early life as a young tailor with great promise. He secured a job at a prestigious hotel and performed repairs for wealthy clients. One such client was so pleased with the work that he widely demonstrated it before then engaging in erratic behavior. Finally, the client offered to purchase a nice house for Lepoutant and establish him in business on the condition that he put up a French sign and call himself Lepoutant from that time forward—of course Lepoutant agreed and thus changed his surname. Much later, Lepoutant discovered that his wealthy benefactor was a social climber with the surname Laputin—and Lepoutant's original, Russian, surname had also been Laputin. The wealthy Laputin had feared that Lepoutant's growing fame as a tailor would sully any chances at social climbing. Not wishing to share a surname with a local tradesman, Laputin had thus encouraged Lepoutant's name change. Unfortunately for the wealthy benefactor, Laputin proved to be a rather common surname in the area and many tradesmen bore it. Thus, ironically, the wealthy benefactor eventually moved to France and changed his own surname to Lepoutant and later died. Thus eventually freed of his duty to retain Lepoutant, the tailor nevertheless did retain it because, he explains, it gives his business a certain distinction.

The Clothesmender by Nikolay Leskov Analysis

The story is said by the editor to be the most linguistically complex in the collection, and the many explanatory endnotes bear this out. Indeed, the tale is fairly banal in English and is something akin to an extended anecdotal joke. The story's division into Chapters is unusual as well and gives the presentation an artificial significance. The basic narrative of the story is constructed through dialogue, or more nearly monologue, as Lepoutant relates his life story and the rather unusual process by which he came to adopt a French surname or, more correctly, an affected French spelling of his Russian surname. Fortunately for Lepoutant, his wealthy benefactor was apparently initially unaware of the large number of workingmen in the region bearing the surname Laputin—the story also relates how Laputin suffered from bearing such a common surname.

Being the first encountered, Lepoutant thus gains an enormous monetary advantage for changing his surname. The somewhat lengthy introduction of the narrator and his living situation is secondary to the narrative, and largely irrelevant except to set up Lepoutant's tale and develop a minor mystery about his French name.

Sleepy by Anton Chekhov

Sleepy by Anton Chekhov Summary

Varka is a thirteen-year-old orphan, working as a nursemaid and assistant for a couple with a child. The couple operates a public house. Varka's duties include chores all day, such as caring for the fire, fetching beer, and preparing food. Her night hours are spent rocking the child, an infant who cries incessantly and cannot be consoled. Varka spends the night hours trying to stay awake by staring into a green light and cooing to the infant. As she is deprived of substantive sleep throughout the entire day and night, for days at a time, Varka is always dozing off. The master and mistress of the house treat her with apparent contempt and abuse her in minor ways, such as calling her names, hazing, slapping her head when she sleeps, and refusing to allow her adequate rest.

As Varka dozes off during the night, she dreams of her father Yélim Stépanov and her mother Pelageya. Yélim has injured himself working and lies in bed groaning in pain. Finally, Pelageya summons a doctor. Yélim states he is ready to die, but the doctor dispatches him to the hospital with orders for surgery. Later, Pelageya returns and delivers the news that Yélim has died. Varka is awakened from her dream of the past by being struck on the head by the mistress. She spends another day on the verge of mental and physical collapse. During the deep of night Varka suddenly has an epiphany—the infant that refuses to sleep, the infant that cries incessantly, causes all of her suffering. If only the infant would sleep, Varka could sleep. She places her hand over he infant's nose and mouth and suffocates the child. Finally, she lies down next to the dead infant and falls into deep sleep.

Sleepy by Anton Chekhov Analysis

Note the similarity of Yélim's dying sounds—"'Bu, bu, bu"'—made by expressing air through pain-clenched lips, and Varka's cooing to the inconsolable infant—"'Bayu, bayushki, bayu!"'. Likewise, the death of Yélim and the death of the infant are conflated with the death of Varka's spirit and the exhausted, deep sleep of her body. Her sleep is thus more akin to death than to the sleep of the master and mistress in the next room. The crisis of the story is precipitated by the unreasonable demands placed upon Varka by her master and mistress—in addition to working all day as a serving girl, she is expected to work all evening as a domestic assistant and then work all night as a nursemaid, leaving literally no time for sleep. It is little wonder, therefore, that Varka is nearly always dozing off. Varka dreams of the circumstances that propelled her into her unhappy situation—the death of her father and her subsequent placing into employment as a necessity. Varka unfortunately decides that the root cause of her suffering is the child, rather than correctly affixing blame to the master and mistress. Yet in any event, Varka ends her sleepless suffering in the only way in which she can exercise direct control over her future.

In Bondage by Fyodor Sologub

In Bondage by Fyodor Sologub Summary

Paka is a young boy of eight, growing up in an affluent family. He has a governess and tutors and spends his day in protected isolation from other children. He finds the company of adults boring and watches other boys, less wealthy boys, playing in the countryside and swimming in the river, and he envies their freedom. Paka begins to imagine that his mother is really a fairy that has ensorcelled him and carried him away to a strange magical land where he is held in bondage: in the distant real world he imagines himself a prince. Paka's daydreaming continues and becomes quite real to him. As he is so compliant, his governess grows careless and one day Paka wanders away and meets three brothers, Antoshka, Lyovka, and Lyoshka. He explains to them that he is really a prince but that he has been captured by a fairy and held in bondage. The three brothers say the fairy must be a witch and they promise to intervene on Paka's behalf. Paka returns home and dreams of the day when the three wise brothers will save him from his mystical bondage.

The three brothers pay a drunken man, whom they believe to be a wizard, to teach them magical words to dispel a witch's spell. They then fashion three black arrows and inscribe them with runes. Then sneak to Paka's house during a dinner party being hosted by Paka's mother. The three boys throw the arrows through the window and shout out their magical words—in truth, they are simple obscenities. The boys then run away, believing they have broken the spell. Paka realizes that the three brothers' attempt has failed—he is still ensorcelled. His mother then coaxes from him the whole story and the dinner party continues. Later, Paka and his mother leave town as the three brothers wave to him from the train station platform.

In Bondage by Fyodor Sologub Analysis

Paka is the most affluent protagonist in the collection of stories, though it avails him nothing but—as he sees it—bondage. The entire story is a confluence of Paka's imaginary adventure with his actual situation, though the narrative focuses heavily on his imaginary interpretation of events. In essence, he is a wealthy child who befriends three brothers from a working class family. Disapproving of his notion, Paka's mother apparently takes him away on an extended voyage. Paka's governess and tutor are disciplined for allowing the entire event to develop. This fairly uninteresting situation is made fabulous by Paka's interpretation—his mother is a fairy, his boredom is bondage, his governess and tutor are Arguses (in classical mythology, the Argus was a guardian giant with 100 eyes), and the local children are world-wise. The three brothers also participate with Paka's imagination—to them, his mother is a witch, not a fairy. Humorously, Paka dislikes the characterization and insists she is a fairy. The three brothers imagine a local drunkard to be a powerful wizard and then concoct a childish plan to dispel the witch's mystical bondage of Paka. They execute their plan well but of

course it avails nothing. Later, the three brothers receive a paternal lecture. The story is unique among the collection inasmuch as it deals with wealthier people, although their affluence is more of backdrop than a primary narrative driver.

Sunstroke by Ivan Bunin

Sunstroke by Ivan Bunin Summary

On a steamer traveling the Volga River, a lieutenant meets a beautiful stranger and is captivated by her petite form, deep tan, and muscular body. The couple engaged in romantic talk and then disembarks in a small town where they secure a hotel room for the night and engage in a torrid sexual encounter. The lieutenant learns that the woman is from a distant town, is married, and has a child. She refuses to give her name, instead supplying the fictitious name of Marya Morevna or calling herself simply 'the princess from beyond the sea' or 'the beautiful stranger'. When the lieutenant wonders about future arrangements the woman laughs, dismisses the thought, and says they have merely been victims of sunstroke, explaining their impetuous behavior. In the morning the woman boards the steamer to continue her voyage and insists that the lieutenant remain in the town for another day to take the next steamer. He complies but spends the morning in anguish. He recalls the sexual encounter as the most intense of his life and wonders how he can exist without the women. He wonders about finding her in her distant town but realizes the futility of such a search. He wanders through the town in a depressed mood, envious that everyone else appears to be happy. He finally returns to the hotel room and spends a depressed evening and night. In the morning he is much recovered, the distance of even a little time proving a great help to his mood. He tips the wait staff generously and proceeds to the river to board another steamer and continue his voyage.

Sunstroke by Ivan Bunin Analysis

Note the texture of the story and the constant and intense focus on heat and light; the narrative is drenched in brilliant, irresistible sunlight. Rooms are described as ovens, the streets are boiling with heat, and the water glistens with light. The entire construction positions the reader alongside the protagonists as the heat and sunstroke bears down with inescapable force. The lieutenant is interested in making the relationship long lasting but the woman has other responsibilities—she is married and has a child, and enjoys the extra-marital affair as a one-time occurrence. She thus refuses even to give her name, using only fantastic epithets—note that Marya Morevna is a "fairy princess in Russian folk tales" (Notes, p. 354). Of course this flight after conquest only makes the woman more irresistibly desirable to the lieutenant. After the woman departs the lieutenant spends the bulk of the narrative fuming about losing her, rather than enjoying having been with her. He finds the daily life of the town irritating inasmuch as he imagines, probably wrongly, that everyone he meets is happy and carefree. Note how his mental state is echoed in the symbolism of his hotel room—at first mussed by their sexual encounter, later put to rights except for one stray hairpin. Thus, by the next morning the lieutenant is much recovered and the frustrating loss of the woman has become more of a pleasant sexual memory. His sunstroke has abided. The story is beautifully crafted and contains much symbolism and metaphor.

The Cave by Evgeny Zamyatin

The Cave by Evgeny Zamyatin Summary

Martin and Masha live in a flat in Petersburg. They are desperately poor, Masha is seriously ill, Martin is without work or income, and the winter is freezing cold. The couple lives in a multi-room tenement, but they retreat back into the innermost room to concentrate heat. Even so, in the deep of winter they run out of fuel and face the real prospect of freezing to death inside their apartment. Martin is frantic in his attempts to provide for Masha but contemplates a phial of poison secreted in the apartment. As their situation becomes increasingly desperate, Martin begins to sink deeper into depression.

Martin calls on the Obertyshev family in his quest for fuel. They have much fuel and voice sympathy for his plight but are unwilling to give him logs for the fire. Martin leaves their house then sneaks back in the vestibule and gathers up several logs. Obertyshev hears him, but Martin calls out that he simply forgot to close the front door tightly. He takes the logs home and burns them. In the morning a government official arrives and tells Martin that the theft has been noticed and reported and that Obertyshev blames Martin for the loss. Martin is ordered to return the stolen logs before Obertyshev files an official complaint with higher authorities. Martin agrees and the official departs. Martin and Masha contemplate their plight and Martin produces the poison, apparently intending to take it. Masha points out that she will certainly die without Martin, will probably shortly die anyway, and should be the one to use the poison. At Masha's insistence, Martin stokes the fire with papers from the desk and then leaves the tenement, wandering through the forbidding city.

The Cave by Evgeny Zamyatin Analysis

The plot of the narrative is fairly simple—a destitute couple faces illness, crushing poverty, and the prospect of freezing to death. The husband steals wood to warm the house but faces the prospect of future criminal charges. The sick wife decides to end her life by using poison, thus alleviating her own suffering and the burden that she believes she is placing on her husband. The husband, crushed by depression, apparently agrees. The bulk of the narrative is not devoted to plot, however, but to the creation of a somber and depressing tone. The extended metaphor used is that of pre-historic times when humanity eked out a precarious existence by living in caves and wearing animal furs. For Martin and Masha, however, not much is different between pre-historic times and the then-contemporaneous world. The couple faces a precarious existence without food or fuel, and has no real way of gaining either. The metaphor includes the comparison of tenement rooms to caves, clothing to animal skins, the biting cold to a glacier, and so forth. Martin's crushing despair is portrayed by aimless wandering, an inability to effect personal change, a focus on poison, and repetitive speech patterns. The story contains the most imagery of any in the collection.

The Death of Dolgushov by Isaac Babel

The Death of Dolgushov by Isaac Babel Summary

The narrator is a mounted soldier in a communist regiment composed of Third International soldiers. Korochaev, the divisional commander, has lost the faith of the men and seeks death at the front lines. The narrator watches the front-line brigades deploy on an open field but remains with elements behind the line, including nurses and seriously wounded men receiving treatment. Vytyagaichenko, the regimental commander, sleeps. Then, Polish forces set up machine guns and begin firing into the area causing much confusion. Bugles blow alarms and the able-bodied men ready themselves to move away. The nurses ride horses but the seriously wounded are abandoned. The regiment moves away at a walk to conserve strength.

Later in the day the forces enter Brody but are driven back out by a counterattack. The narrator is overcome by fear, sure that the attack will prove fatal as the unit comes under small arms fire near a cemetery. His friend Grishchuk wonders aloud why women go through with the routine of courting, marriage, and childbirth—after all, it only leads to soldiers killing each other and death. The men come across Dolgushov, a communications specialist, sitting by the site of the road. He has been eviscerated such that his beating heart is exposed, yet he retains consciousness. He wants to pass on his papers and be shot to spare him the misery of a slow death. The narrator is overcome by fear and refuses to administer the coup de grace, instead skittering his horse away some distance. Afonka, the platoon commander and the narrator's friend, takes the papers and executes Dolgushov by shooting him through the mouth. The narrator offers a timid apology and Afonka, enraged, thinks about shooting him, too. Grishchuk intervenes and an enraged Afonka storms off in a different direction. Grischchuk and the narrator continue down the road.

The Death of Dolgushov by Isaac Babel Analysis

The conflict is not specified but can be surmised from historical context; the battle is most likely between forces of the Third International and Polish components of the Allied Intervention during the Polish-Bolshevik War c. 1920. Little more can be derived; the fighting apparently takes place near the villages Brody and Radziwillow, placing the setting between Warszawa and Łódź. The communist forces are probably strategically on the attack though apparently tactically routed, and the communist unit forces involved in the short story are possible partially composed of international volunteers from a variety of backgrounds, explaining Afonka's vituperative comment about soldiers with glasses. It is possible that the battle is part of the successful Polish defense of Warsaw. The unit obviously contains mounted soldiers and is probably a cavalry regiment with heavy weapons attached. The attack drives upon regimental elements which had been considered located in a safe place, as the nurses attend the wounded and the advancing Polish forces cause an immediate evacuation and repositioning. The

tachanka in the story was a horse-drawn machine gun platform sporting a mounted heavy machine gun and fore-and-aft seating arrangements—a sort of mobile machine gun emplacement. Prior to the advent of armored vehicles, the tachanka formed a primitive type of mobile heavy weapon.

The story is told in a brutal, honest, and open style that pulls no punches. Here are men being slaughtered in horrible ways. Dogushov's execution is seen as an act of mercy to spare him the agony of a slow but certain death. The narrator's inability to administer the coup de grace is seen by Afonka as unforgivable selfishness, causing a rupture in their friendship. The story presents one of the most brutal scenes in the collection and is told in an unromantic and dispassionate voice.

Yuletide Story by Mikhail Zoshchenko

Yuletide Story by Mikhail Zoshchenko Summary

The narrator denunciates Yuletide stories as drivel and then relates a Yuletide story learned from an old doctor with white-hair and a voice destroyed by alcoholism. The narrator blames the doctor's decayed physical condition on the events subsequently described. The doctor relates a long-ago visit by Vasily Mitrofanovich Ledentsov, a middle-aged patient presenting with feelings of imminent death. However, a thorough examination demonstrates excellent health so the doctor prescribes an expectorant and requests a follow-up visit. The next day Vasily's aunt appears, states Vasily died the previous night, and requests a death certificate. The doctor accompanies the woman to the apartment where he sees Vasily's corpse on a table, and he writes out a death certificate. He leaves the apartment but forgets his overshoes and so returns whereupon he sees Vasily walking around in perfect health. The doctor is frightened as if he has seen a ghost and runs away, only later to learn that Vasily had embezzled a large sum of money and was trying to vanish. After months of legal wrangling and inquests, the good doctors' overshoes are finally returned on Christmas Eve.

Yuletide Story by Mikhail Zoshchenko Analysis

Yuletide story is very brief—scarcely three pages—and is more akin to a joke or humorous anecdote than a short story. The narrator is anonymous and nearly totally effaced, and the protagonist is also unnamed; oddly, the antagonist is well-described and named. The narrator blames the doctor's white hair and alcoholism on the terrible fright putatively taken by seeing Vasily alive and well after apparent death: the doctor is obviously something of a nincompoop. The honest-to-goodness Yuletide aspect of the story comes when the doctor's overshoes are returned on Christmas Eve, lending the story a sarcastic tone.

Characters

Alexander Pushkin

Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837) was born in Moscow. Pushkin was educated at the Lyceum at Tsarskoye Selo and published poetry as early as 1814. In modern times, Pushkin is widely hailed as one of Russia's greatest literary figures—"One Russian nineteenth-century critic called him 'Our all.'" (p. 2)—and is generally remembered best for his poetry. Pushkin's numerous publications include a vast body of lyrical poetry, several lengthy narrative poems including "The Bronze Horseman", a novel in verse, a historical drama, four dramatic tragedies, several short stories, and the novella "The Queen of Spades". The Pushkin story in the current collection was originally published anonymously in 1830 in the collection entitled The Tales of Ivan Petrovich Belkin. Pushkin stated that in prose he valued "brevity, precision, and naked simplicity" (p. 3) and these qualities are evident in the story presented in the current collection. Pushkin died of wounds received dueling in defense of his wife's honor.

Nikolay Vasilievich Gogol-Yanovsky

Nikolay Vasilievich Gogol-Yanovsky (1809 - 1852) was born in Sorochintsy into a family of Ukrainian Cossack gentry. He was educated at the Lyceum at Nezhin, worked in the civil service, and taught history at various postings. His early attempts at publication were frustrating and led to an early move to Lubeck. He published his first successful works in 1831 and in 1836 published his comedy Revizor. From c. 1836 to c. 1848 Gogol lived outside of Russia, and toward his death he suffered a prolonged religious and moral crisis. Gogol remains one of the most enigmatic and controversial figures in Russian literature. Gogol's The Nose was rejected for publication as "'common' and 'filthy'" (p. 31) before appearing in a magazine edited by Pushkin where it was characterized as a nonsensical joke. Modern criticism tends to view the story with a variety of interpretations.

Ivan Sergeyevich Turgenev

Ivan Sergeyevich Turgenev (1818-1883) was born into a wealthy family in the Province of Oryol. He studied philosophy in German and contemplated becoming a university professor before selecting a literary vocation. He published first in 1847 and within five years was arrested, detained, and banished to his ancestral estate—ostensibly for penning an obituary of Gogol. From 1855 onward, Turgenev spent most of his time abroad, primarily in Europe, and maintained an intimate contact with various famous literary persons. He wrote six novels, numerous short stories, and other pieces. Turgenev's work is free of most sentiment, and he is often described as a poetic realist. In a letter to a friend, Turgenev claimed the incident reported in A Living Relic was based on a true episode.

Feodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky and Count Lev Nikolaevich Tol

Feodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky (1821-1881) is one of the best-known Russian writers of all time. The story Bobok first appeared in 1873 and was written immediately after Dostoevsky's nonumental work The Demons. The story presents a fusion of monologue and dialogue and adequately portrays Dostoevsky's personal style. As Dostoevsky is so well-known, the current book provides little biographical data about him.

Count Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy (1828-1910) is one of the best-known Russian writers of all time. The story The Three Hermits first appeared in 1886. The story adequately portrays Tolstoy's latter work and style. As Tolstoy is so well-known, the current book provides little biographical data about him.

Nikolay Semyonovich Leskov

Nikolay Semyonovich Leskov (1831-1895) was born in the Province of Oryol. He was orphaned at age sixteen and thereafter split his time between earning a livelihood and gaining an education. Leskov traveled widely for employment and was exposed to much of Russian life including an easy familiarity with Russian peasant life. Leskov entered literature late and through journalism, publishing his first story in 1863. His first novel was published in 1864 and proved controversial. Ostracized by influential critics, he was nevertheless popular with readers. The Clothesmender demonstrates Leskov's predilection for wordplay and linguistic pranks, and reads as an extended anecdote.

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov (1860-1904) was born in Taganrog, on the Sea of Azov, to a poor family; his grandfather had been a serf. Chekhov studied medicine at the University of Moscow, received a medical degree, and briefly entered into practice. During his education, he made his living selling sketches and stories to various magazines. Chekhov's literary career continued to expand under the attention of Dmitry Grigorovich and Alexey Suvorin. By 1902 Checkhov had published numerous volumes of short stories and by 1903 he had published five major plays and several minor plays. Today, Chekhov is rated as one of the all-time great writers of short stories and his influence has been especially evident in England. The story Sleepy is an example of realistic impressionism and was written in 1888. Chekhov died of tuberculosis.

Feodor Kuzmich Teternikov

Feodor Kuzmich Teternikov (1863-1927) wrote under the pseudonym Sologub. He was born in St. Petersburg to a poor but artistic family. He graduated from a Teacher's College and worked as a schoolteacher, eventually rising to superintendent of elementary school. He published several novels between 1896 and 1912. In addition to

novels and short stories, he also wrote and published poetry and was influential in the Russian Symbolism movement. Much of his work postulates a dual nature composed of God and evil. The characters in In Bondage are strange children, characteristic of much of his work. After the suicide of his wife he became a recluse and published little new material.

Ivan Alexeyevich Bunin

Ivan Alexeyevich Bunin (1870-1953) was born south of Moscow to a landed but impoverished family. He led a life of literary exploration, writing both verse and prose; today he is remembered primarily for his prose. His publications gained prominence c. 1910 and continued to increase in prominence through at least 1930. In 1919, Bunin emigrated to France and spent the remainder of his life in exile. Some of his seminal works were written in exile. Bunin held great respect for Tolstoy and was somewhat influenced by that writer. Wonderment, love, and death are common themes in Bunin's work. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1933, the first Russian writer to be so honored. He died in Paris and, since c. 1956, his works have been republished in Russia.

Evgeny Ivanovich Zamyatin

Evgeny Ivanovich Zamyatin (1884-1937) was born in Lebedyan, Central Russia; a town featured in Turgenev's writing. He received his higher education in mathematics and engineering at the Department of Naval Engineerng of the Polytechnic Institute in St. Petersburg. During his student days he was imprisoned for political activism, and was again imprisoned in later life. He first published in 1911 and in the next few years was politically prosecuted for some of his works. During World War I, Zamyatin worked as an engineer. During his life he produced a few volumes of stories, four plays, two novels, and a volume of essays. In 1931, due to political hazing, Zamyatin emigrated to France and settled in Paris where he died.

Isaac Emmanuilovich Babel

Isaac Emmanuilovich Babel (1894-1941) was born in Odessa in a working Jewish family. In early life he studied Hebrew and the Talmud, and developed an early enthusiasm for French literature and language. His first stories were written in French though his first publications, during 1916, were in Russian. Babel worked in a variety of trades and places during his early literary development, until he became prominent c. 1924. Babel wrote two volumes of stories, a handful of uncollected stories, and two plays. During the 1930s Babel faced political hazing. He was arrested in 1939 and died in prison during 1941. Babel was politically rehabilitated in 1957. Babel's The Death of Dolgushov is characteristic of his terse style.

Mikhail Mikhailovich Zoshchenko

Mikhail Mikhailovich Zoshchenko (1895-1958) was born in Poltava. He studied at the Law School of the University of Petrograd but did not graduate, enlisting in 1915 as a volunteer. Zoshchenko's first literary output commenced in 1921 and his first collected volume was published in 1922. Through the 1920s and 1930s, Zoshchenko was enormously popular in Russia and was also widely appreciated abroad. But in 1946 he was politically denounced and his works suppressed. He was, ultimately, expelled from Russia, and his literary output suffered remarkably. Yuletide Story was written in 1926.

Objects/Places

Stationmasterappears in The Stationmaster

In Russia, as indeed in many European countries, each stagecoach station was supervised by a stationmaster. The man would live in the same building from which he conducted his business. The stationmaster was in charge of organizing routes and schedules, procuring vehicles and horses, and providing, for a fee, transient lodgings and board for travelers. Simeon Vyrin is the protagonist and stationmaster of an unnamed post-station in Pushkin's story The Stationmaster.

Major Platon Kovalyov's Noseappears in The Nose

Major Platon Kovalyov's nose leaves his face one morning, apparently upon its own initiative. The departure causes no physical harm but is very embarrassing to the Major. The nose pursues an independent existence as a government employee for several days before being apprehended by the police, who return it to the Major. After several weeks pass by, the nose reattaches during the night, again apparently upon its own initiative, and in the morning the Major is much relieved to find his life has returned to normal. The nose is the protagonist in Gogol's story The Nose.

Vale of Jehoshaphatappears in Bobok

In Dostoevsky's story Bobok, Major-General Vassili Vassilitch Pervoyedov refers to the collective state of consciousness of the dead as the Vale of Jehoshaphat. In the story, the dead are buried and after a few days regain a sort of metaphysical consciousness. This state persists for between three to six months, though it gradually fades away in intensity. As the body completely disintegrates, so the consciousness evaporates. The Vale of Jehoshaphat is a place of conversation but not, as one might imagine, a place of much introspection.

The Lord's Prayerappears in The Three Hermits

In Tolstoy's The Three Hermits, a bishop teaches three holy men the Lord's Prayer. The text is derived from the Christian New Testament and is found in Matthew 6:9-13; it is a prayer offered by Jesus Christ during his mortal ministry as an illustrative example of the proper manner of prayer. The well-meaning but unimaginative bishop feels the three hermit's own heartfelt prayer to be insufficient and instead attempt to teach them to offer the Lord's Prayer as rote repetition in place of sincere prayer.

The Green Lightappears in Sleepy

In Chekhov's Sleepy, Varka spends her nights in a room with an inconsolable infant, rocking and cooing to the child and keeping herself away by staring into a green light. The light source is fairly muted so that it does not disturb the master and mistress. The green light often carries over into Varka's dreams where it becomes some other object during the awake-to-asleep transition.

Combatappears in The Death of Dolgushov

The setting of Babel's story is military combat. Although the story offers salient details about the political situation, these are in most respects secondary to the narrative. Instead, the story focuses on the trial of combat faced by the characters and the impossible situations in which they find themselves. In combat, morality changes and characters understanding this frequently reject characters that are unable to look past their personal ideology.

The Bee Hutappears in A Living Relic

In Turgenev's story the protagonist, Lukerya, lives in a hut used to story honey bee nests during the winter months. During the winter, of course, Lukerya is moved inside a house. She has apparently spent seven years living in the hut and knows it well. She talks about the wonders of nature and the spirit that she has experienced in the hut during her time and finds it an acceptable and even enjoyable abode. For his own part, Piotr, the narrator, finds the hut to be a rundown and ramshackle building.

The French Signappears in The Clothesmender

In Leskov's story the protagonist and narrator is confused about a business sign in French reading maître tailleur Lepoutant. From the sign, he assumes that the proprietor must be French or at least of French extraction—but this is not the case. The remainder of the story explains why that Russian tailor uses a French surname and promotes a French-language sign.

Overshoesappears in Yuletide Story

In Zoshchenko's story the protagonist wears a pair of overshoes to the antagonist's tenement and then forgets them on his way out. Returning for the overshoes, the protagonist is frightened and runs away, abandoning the overshoes. Later, the overshoes are returned by government officials following a lengthy legal investigation. The return of the overshoes on Christmas eve informs the title of the story.

Cavesappears in The Cave

In Zamyatin's story houses are characterized as caverns and individual rooms are characterized as caves, or series of caves. The story also suggests that then-contemporaneous living conditions were essentially no better than pre-historic conditions. The characters in the story are primarily concerned with getting enough fuel to keep their 'cave' heated.

Themes

Realism

Most of the stories in the collection feature a strong vein of realism, where events are presented as being factual, credible, and remarkable only inasmuch as they are characteristic of a larger phenomenon. For example, Pushkin's stationmaster is a normal man working in a government job; his daughter's elopement is a story common to any place and time, and the incident is remarkable only inasmuch as it occurs again and again, the whole world around. Other stories are more fanciful, such that Turgenev's protagonist suffers from an unspecified degenerative disease while Dostoevsky's narrator overhears the conversations of the dead. Yet in both cases, the narrative structure presents a realistic interpretation of the atypical situation. For example, Turgenev's protagonist suffers physically but becomes enlightened mentally and feels that, in the balance, the tradeoff is acceptable. In the larger sense, everyone ages and dies but through the process creates a life. Likewise, the situation portrayed by Dostoevsky is fantastic, but the recently dead continue to bicker about trivial worldly things and attempt to assert their station even as they molder in the grave.

The Common Person's Plight

Virtually all of the stories deal with the issued faced by Russian peasants or working class people. Pushkin's story features a stationmaster and dispatch carrier; Gogol's story features a barber and a civil servant; Turgenev's story features a decrepit peasant girl; Dostoevsky's story features a large caste of recently deceased people from various walks of life; and so on. While Turgenev's narrator is a wealthy sportsman, the story is hardly about him or his circumstances; likewise, Leskov's story features a wealthy social climber but the story doesn't revolve around that character. Instead, the stories present typical Russian people in typical situations that illustrate the common person's plight in the world. Were the stationmaster in Pushkin's story a wealthy aristocrat, he would hardly be ejected from a house for seeking his kidnapped daughter. Instead, the stories illustrate the constraints within which the working and lower classes exist. Indeed, the notes make it clear that several of the stories—notably Turgenev's story—focused such attention on the common person's plight that social changes were enacted to alleviate somewhat their suffering.

Humor

Many of the stories feature a goodly amount of humor and some present pure folderol. Gogol's story, for example, is about a man's nose that leaves his face and pursues an independent life as a government worker before being apprehended by police and forcibly returned to the man. Likewise, Dostoevsky's story is about a man who overhears the conversations of the dead through happenstance. Leskov'e entire story is

little more than a humorous anecdote, and Zoshchenko's story is very much like an extended joke. Even Tolstoy's story presents an inept Bishop who makes rather a fool of himself. While some stories are entirely free of humor—for example, Chekhov's Sleepy and Babel's The Death of Dolgushov—most contain a fair amount of light-heartedness. This aspect of the stories is enjoyable and engaging, and illustrates the foolishness of many human conceits. For example, in Bobok the characters are all dead and one would imagine them to be concerned with fairly metaphysical things; instead they argue about petty debts left over from life and harangue others to demonstrate the respect due social station. While there is humor in the story, there is also a somber cautionary element reminding the reader of the truly important aspects of life. Thus, humor is used in an appropriate and creative way.

Style

Point of View

The stories in the collection feature a variety of narrative construction techniques and vary in point of view. However, most of the stories are related from the first-person perspective where the narrator remains usually anonymous and generally effaced. In other words, the stories have the tone of a story related in a social gathering—a sort of related anecdote among friends. Such a style is typical of the Russian realist movement that encompasses many of the stories included in the collection. Pushkin's story features a narrator who somewhat participates in the action while Zoshchenko's story features a narrator who simply hears and then repeats an anecdote, along with some minor commentary. The most atypical point-of-view provided is perhaps that of Dostoevsky's story, where the narrator is well-defined and characterized, yet primarily plays the role of passive observer. In each story, however, the point of view selected for the story is appropriate and aids materially in making the narrative accessible and intelligible.

Setting

The typical setting in most of the short stories is a rather nondescript Russian countryside or urban area. Few of the stories rely on setting to any great degree for narrative success. For example, in Chekhov's story the protagonist is a poor orphan who suffers from a sort of enslavement, or at least from casual low-intensity abuse from which she cannot escape. While the story is set in a Russian home during the late 1800s, it could as easily function in an American home during modern times. Similarly, Zoshchenko's story deals with a Russian doctor and the Russian government investigation, but it would function as well were it set in England. Some stories rely more on a sense of setting than others, of course. For example, Babel's story requires a period of open and unrestrained warfare—but once again, the narrative could be successful were it set during the e.g. Vietnam Conflict.

Most of the stories feature peasants or working class Russians going about their normal lives. Pushkin's characters are government functionaries, while Leskov's characters are Russian travelers, churchmen, or tailors. There is some variation, however. For example, Turgenev's narrator is a wealthy sportsman and Tolstoy's protagonist is a Bishop. Perhaps the most atypical story in the collection is that of Gogol, but even here all but one of the characters is fairly typical.

Language and Meaning

Most of the short stories feature a traditional narrative structure such that meaning is derived from descriptive narration and dialogue. As usual with short literature, much of the deeper, subtle meaning is derived from proximity of narrative elements. Thus, while

Bobok is ostensibly about the conversations of the recently deceased it is clear that the story's deeper meaning is derived only by viewing it as a commentary on then-contemporaneous Russian society. Because all of the stories are offered in English-language translation, the subtle linguistic meaning of various passages can become confused or lost. To mitigate this, the editor includes twenty-four pages of endnotes, most dealing with matters of translation but several dealing with cultural issues.

The language of the collection poses a unique situation inasmuch as the stories are presented in the original Russian as well as translated English. Most of the stories have been widely published in various versions and translations, and thus different publications of the same story may vary markedly in language used. The presentation here focuses on the story's use as a device to learn foreign language fluency, and thus the selection and the translation tend toward straightforward representation.

Structure

The book features an intriguing parallel structure such that odd-numbered pages are presented in English and even-numbered pages are presented in Russian. The contents of facing pages are equivalent, the English-language page being translated from the facing Russian-language page. Sentences thus run parallel and the book provides a material aid to students of either language. For persons using the book primarily as a linguistic tool, the editor suggests a reading order differing from that of the presentation; the alternative order places the stories in ascending relative linguistic difficulty (page vi). The 416-page book contains a foreword, twelve short stories originally written in Russian, 24 pages of notes, a 6-page questionnaire, and a lengthy vocabulary section. If the book is approached primarily as a collection of fiction, the length for reading purposes should be considered about 208 pages. The included stories are: The Stationmaster by Alexander Pushkin; The Nose by Nikolay Gogol; A Living Relic by Ivan Turgenev; Bobok by Fyodor Dostoevsky; The Three Hermits by Leo Tolstoy; The Clothesmender by Nikolay Leskov; Sleepy by Anton Chekhov; In Bondage by Fyodor Sologub; Sunstroke by Ivan Bunin; The Cave by Evgeny Zamyatin; The Death of Dolgushov by Isaac Babel; and Yuletide Story by Mikhail Zoshchenko. Each story has preface material giving a quite detailed biography of the author as well as biographical notes about the included story. Most of the stories have been translated into English on numerous occasions and may be encountered in a variety of editions and formats; most are available in some form from free online resources.

Quotes

Who has not cursed stationmasters, who has not bickered with them? Who, in a moment of rage, has not demanded from them the fateful book in order to write down in it his futile complaint at victimization, rudeness and inefficiency? Who does not consider them the outcasts of the human race, equal to the petty clerks of yore or at best to the brigands of Muron? Let us, however, be fair; le us try to put ourselves in their position, and perhaps we shall judge them much more leniently. What is a stationmaster? A veritable martyr of the fourteenth grade, protected by his rank from beatings only, and that not always (I refer to the conscience of my readers). What are the duties of this dictator, as Prince Vyazemsky facetiously calls him? Are they not really tantamount to a life at hard labor? No respite by day or by night. All the vexation accumulated during his dreary journey the traveler takes out on the stationmaster. Be the weather insupportable, the road bad, the driver stubborn, the horses reluctant—the stationmaster is to blame. The traveler who enters his poor dwelling looks upon him as an enemy; well and good if he can soon be rid of the uninvited visitor. But what if there are no horses? Lord, what oaths, what threats will be showered on his head! In rain and slush he is obliged to run the round of the village; in storms, in Epiphany frosts he retires into the passageway to have at least a moment's rest from the shouts and shoves of his irritated customer. (The Stationmaster, p. 5)

On March 25th there took place, in Petersburg, an extraordinarily strange occurrence. The barber Ivan Yakovlevich, who lives on Voznesensky Avenue (his family name has been lost and even on his signboard, where a gentleman is depicted with a lathered check and the inscription "Also bloodletting," there is nothing else)—the barber Ivan Yakovlevich woke up rather early and smelled fresh bread. Raising himself slightly in bed he saw his spouse, a rather respectable lady who was very fond of drinking coffee, take some newly baked loaves out of the oven. (The Nose, p. 33)

"Good gracious, Lukerya," I managed to say at last, "what happened to you?"
"Oh, such a misfortune befell me. But, master, do not feel disgusted, do not turn away from my misfortune, sit down over there, on that keg, a little closer, otherwise you won't be able to hear me.... You see how loud-voiced I have become! Oh, I am so glad to have seen you! How did you happen to come to Alekseyevka?"
Lukerya spoke very softly and weakly but without pausing.
"Ermolay the hunter brought me here. But do tell me..." (A Living Relic, p. 99)

"How could one short-change you if, since January, I reckon, you haven't paid us anything! There is a little bill against you at the shop."
"Why, that's really silly. I think it is most silly to try to claim debts here! Go upstairs. Demand from my niece, she is my heiress."
"Well, how can I demand now, and where can I go? We have both reached the end of the line and stand equal in our sins before the Lord's judgment."
"In our sins!" the deceased lady parroted scornfully. "Don't you dare speak to me at all!"
"Oh-ho-ho-ho!"

"After all, the shopkeeper obeys the lady, your excellency."
"Why shouldn't he?"
"Well, you know, your excellency, there is a new order here."
"What sort of new order is it?"
"Why, we are all dead, so to speak, your excellency."
"Oh yes! Still, all the same, order...." (Bobok, p. 137)

A Bishop was sailing from the city of Arkhangelsk to the Solovetsky Islands. On the same vessel there were pilgrims sailing to visit the holy shrines. The wind was favorable, the weather fair, the sea smooth. The pilgrims—some were lying down, some having a bite to eat, some sitting in groups—were talking to each other. The Bishop, too, came out on deck, began to pace the bridge. He approached the bow, saw a group of people gathered together. A peasant was pointing out something in the sea and speaking, and the people were listening. The Bishop stopped, looked where the peasant was pointing: there was nothing to be seen, only the sea gleaming in the sun. The Bishop came closer, began to listen. The peasant saw the Bishop, took off his cap and fell silent. The people also saw the Bishop, also took off their caps, paid their respects. (The Three Hermits, p. 167)

What a silly custom it is to wish everyone new happiness in the new year, yet sometimes something of the sort does come true. On this subject allow me to tell you of a little episode having a perfectly Yuletide character. (The Clothesmender, p. 185)

That enemy is the baby.
She laughs. She is surprised. How is it that until now she had failed to understand such a simple thing? The green patch, the shadows and the cricket, too, seem to laugh and be surprised.
The false notion takes hold of Varka. She gets up from her stool and, smiling a wide smile, without blinking her eyes, walks about the room. She is pleasantly tickled by the thought that presently she will be rid of the baby which shackles her, hand and foot.... To kill the baby and then sleep, sleep, sleep....
Laughing, winking at the green patch, and shaking her fingers at it, Varka steals up to the cradle and bends over the baby. Having strangled it, she quickly lies down on the floor, laughing with joy now that she can sleep, and a minute later is already sleeping as soundly as if she were dead.... (Sleepy, p. 235)

Paka sat in the tall summerhouse by the fence of their villa and gazed into the fields. He happened to have been left alone. And this did not happen often. Paka had a governess; a tutor who taught him some elementary things; and Paka's mamma, too, although she did not spend all her time in the nursery—she had so many of those bothersome social obligations, relations—nevertheless took great care that Paka should be gay, pleasant, amiable, did not go near danger or strange bad little boys, but associated only with children from families of their own circle. And therefore Paka was almost constantly under supervision. Already he was used to it and made no attempt to

set himself free. And then, he was still so small: he was in his eighth year only. (In Bondage, p. 239)

After dinner they came out of the bright, hot glare of the dining room onto the deck and stood by the railing. She closed her eyes, laid her hand palm out against her cheek, laughed her natural, charming laugh—everything was charming about this small woman—and said:
"I am quite drunk. Altogether, I've gone quite mad. Where did you come from? Three hours ago I hadn't even any idea that you existed. I don't even know where you came on board. At Samara? But it doesn't matter, you're a dear. Is it my head going round or are we turning somewhere?" (Sunstroke, p. 273)

Among the rocks, where ages ago had stood Petersburg, roamed at night a gray-trunked mammoth. And wrapped in hides, coats, blankets, rags, the cave dwellers retreated from cave to cave. On Intercession Day Martin Martinych and Masha boarded up the study; on the Day of the Kazan Virgin they made their way out of the dining room and entrenched themselves in the bedroom. There was no further retreating: here they must withstand the siege—or die. (The Cave, p. 293)

"Makes me laugh," said Grishchuk mournfully, and pointed his whip at a man sitting by the roadside, "makes me laugh, why do women take all the trouble...?"
The man sitting by the roadside was Dolgushov, the telephonist. His legs spread, he was staring at us.
"That's how it is," he said when we had comeup. "I'll be finished. Understood?"
"Understood," said Grishchuk, pulling up the horses.
"You must use up a cartridge on me," said Dolgushov.
He sat leaning against a tree. His boots were thrust out apart. Without taking his eyes off me, he carefully peeled back his shirt. His belly had been torn out, his intestines were crawling out onto his knees, and you could see the heartbeats.
"The Polacks will ride up—they'll have fun with me. Here are my papers, you'll write to my mother how and what...."
"No," I answered and spurred my horse.
Dolgushov spread his blue palms out on the ground and examined them incredulously.
"Sneaking off?" he muttered sliding down. "Sneak off, you bastard." (The Death of Dolgushov, pp. 321-323)

It turned out that Vasily Mitrofanovich Ledenstov, an advertising agent, had embezzled three thousand. With that money he wanted to vanish into the blue and begin a new magnificent life....
However, he didn't make it.
The overshoes were returned to the doctor for Christmas, on its very eve, after all sorts of long procedures, declarations, petitions and visits to all sorts of offices. (Yuletide Story, p. 331)

Topics for Discussion

The task of stationmaster as described in Pushkin's story no longer exists in the modern world. There are modern professions that are similar, however, inasmuch as they put people into positions of responsibility without giving them much influence over their situation. What modern-day professions can you think of that are similar in this way to the obsolescent profession of stationmaster?

In Gogol's story, a man's nose leaves his face and pursues an independent life as a government employee until eventually returning to the man's face. During his nose's absence, the man is very embarrassed and reduced. Do you think the nose is intended as an allegory for something else? If so, what, and if not, then what is the story really about?

In Dostoevsky's story, the dead retain consciousness after death for 3-6 months. During that time they can talk and smell, but they can't move around. In the story, the dead talk about the same things they talked about in life. Do you think that is a realistic portrayal of consciousness? Or would the dead really form a radically new society once freed from the constraints of the living? Discuss.

In Tolstoy's story the well-meaning but unperceptive bishop tries to teach the three hermits the Lord's Prayer because he assumes they are not particularly holy men. He bases his assumption on the fact that they claim, humbly, to not know how to worship God and because they do not already know the Lord's Prayer. Do you think it is possible for individuals to achieve personal holiness without the benefits of an organized clergy?

In Checkhov's story, a young girl kills an inconsolable infant in order to quiet it so that she can sleep. Within the framework of the narrative, is this act properly viewed as murder? Does circumstance influence morality? Discuss.

In Babel's story, Dolgushov is mortally wounded and suffering intense pain. He apparently fears that he will soon be captured by the enemy who will torture him further out of spite, and he asks his comrades to ease his suffering by administering a coup de grace. Within the framework of the narrative, is this act properly viewed as murder? Does circumstance influence morality? Discuss.

In Turgenev's story, Lukerya is nearly entirely paralyzed and suffers pain whenever touched. Her life seems terrible, yet she accepts it with happiness, living in a rundown hut and subsisting nearly entirely on water only. Lukerya's chief pleasure in life appears to be the knowledge that her condition prevents her from sinning, and thus leads to a pure spirituality. Can you see in Lukerya an allegory for all of mortal life? Discuss.

The book is obviously intended to serve as a resource for individuals fluent in either Russian or English and seeking fluency in the other language. Can it be used

independently of this function? Can the book serve merely as a collection of short stories? Why or why not?