

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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GOD SEES THE TRUTH BUT WAITS

Leo Tolstoy

Overview Leo Tolstoy was a towering figure of the Russian novel and short story, as well as a vocal and influential public figure. He is uniquely respected for his novel *Anna Karenina* (1873-1877) and for his huge novel/study of *War and Peace* (1869), which deals with five Russian aristocratic families, and the impact on them of the Napoleonic invasion of their country, during six months in 1812. He was also a master of the short story, in which his objective god-like eye reached its peak of sharpness. Among the causes to which he devoted passionate attention were Pacifism and radical Christianity in the strict vein of The Sermon on the Mount. His arguments for radical Pacifism had profound echoes in the public sphere, through the work of such men as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King.

Story

Tolstoy excelled at the vast panoramic work, like *War and Peace*, and at the short story, where he was able to concentrate as much power as in a thousand pages. *God sees the truth but waits* was published in 1872, in the very years when *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* were being published; but the short story excavates the theme of forgiveness, which is only latent in the two great works of the period.

The story opens on a small town in Russia, Vladimir. We jump into the life of Ivan Aksionov, who is a merchant of the town, a well-liked and responsible person whose only weakness, it seems, is that he drinks too much. Ivan decides one day to go to the fair, on business, although his wife pleads with him to stay at home. She has had a nightmare, the previous night, which has warned against this forthcoming trip. He goes.

On the way to the fair, Ivan meets another traveling merchant. They go together to the fair, stopping together at an Inn, and having a few drinks together. They lodge separately, and Ivan rises early to be timely at the fair. Some distance down the road he is stopped by the police, and informed that there has been a murder in the Inn where he lodged. The victim was another traveller.

The police, upon opening Ivan's bag, find in it a bloody knife, clearly the murder weapon. Ivan protests his innocence, is beat up and flogged, and sent to Siberia. After his trial is complete, Ivan's wife can visit him; she sees that his hair has turned white.

Ivan spends 26 years in Siberia. In the prison camp he becomes a mediator, friend, and advisor to many of the inmates, who come to respect him.

One day a new lot of prisoners is brought into the camp. One of the newcomers is Makar Semyonich. After listening to the man in conversation with others, Ivan concludes it must be the merchant with whom he traveled to the fair, long ago. It must be the murderer.

One day the prison guards notice that someone has been spreading dirt in the prison compound, and they suspect one of the prisoners may be responsible. Ivan, it turns out, has already been made aware that Makar is the guilty one, but when questioned by the police he replies that he is not the appropriate person to speak about the matter. Later that day the distraught Makar approaches Ivan, and admits that he was the one who committed the murder in the inn, 26 years ago. Aksionov forgives Makar, right there on the spot, and feels infinitely better for it. Makar

confesses to the authorities, and papers are filed for the release of Ivan. Unfortunately Ivan dies before he can reach home. Fortunately, he dies in peace.

Tolstoy not only spins a tale of forgiveness, but in the end does so subtly. Some trigger is required, to induce Makar's confession to Ivan, and then to the authorities. The trigger is Ivan's decision not to squeal on Makar, concerning the building of a tunnel. This act of self-discipline, on Ivan's part, opens Makar's heart

Themes

One important theme, in this pregnant short story, is that one is always **vulnerable in life**. Ivan was simply the innocent victim of a set-up, which brought about his 26 years of mistaken identity imprisonment in Siberia. Ivan was a victim of rotten luck, and judicial hastiness.

A yet more important theme is that **forgiving** others gives us satisfaction, even if others have wronged us. This message, which is inscribed in the major religious traditions, appears supported by 'common sense.' To resent the wrong others have done us, is a burden on us. To forgive others, for the wrongs they have done us, relieves us from the pain of negativity.

Character

Ivan Aksionov was a successful merchant: 'he had two shops and a house of his own.' He had been known as a party guy in the old days, but was quite reformed, in love with his wife and family, and was in fine fettle, although his wife warned him that she had had a tragic dream about the trip he was taking to the Nizhny Fair. He dismissed her worries, spent the first night in an inn, rose early the next day, and started early for the Fair. En route, however, he was arrested, charged (falsely) with having murdered a fellow merchant the previous night, and then transported, through the legal system, into a nightmare sequence of accusations which ended up with slave labor in Siberia. His character? Patience, endurance, ultimate goodness, and even saintliness.

Makar is guilty not only of murder, but of dumping the blame for the murder onto Ivan. There is no sign, even when Makar meets Ivan in the prison camp, that Makar is prepared to confess his crime. But after Ivan has forgiven him, Makar goes to the authorities to confess.

MAJOR CHARACTER

IVAN AKSIONOV (conscientious)

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Parallels The archaic and classical experiences, perhaps understandably, abound in examples of saintly patience, not necessarily of the Ivan forgiveness brand, Christian in essence, but in many forms. Job, in the Judaic Christian religious tradition, sets the highest example for tolerance of god-inflicted sufferings, enduring whatever God could pitch at him, and mocking the taunts of his adversaries, who say Job's suffering is meaningless. The rebellious Hellenic god, Prometheus, kept to himself the secret of the offspring who would dethrone Zeus, and with this coded knowledge managed to survive the almost endless barrage of punishments Zeus inflicted

on him. Oedipus the King, in the play of Sophocles, earns the sufferings—blindness, terrible knowledge of good and evil—which his life opens and in the sequel play manages, in the Grove of Colonus, to acquire a kind of peace that passes understanding.

Illustrative moments

Surprise Aksionov was surprised, on the second day of his trip to the Nizhny Fair, to be overtaken and stopped by a troika of law enforcement agents, who began to question him about his actions the previous night. He soon realizes that there has been a murder, that night, of the other merchant who had been staying at the inn. His throat had been slit! To the shock of Aksionov, the bloody murder weapon is found in his luggage. It is obvious to Aksionov, a most upright man, that he has somehow been framed, but he is unable to exonerate himself in the nearby court. Even a petition to the Tzar, from his wife, is useless. It's off to Siberia!

Suffering 'For twenty-six years Aksionov lived as a convict in Siberia. His hair turned white as snow, and his beard grew long, thin, and grey. All his mirth went...' His only reading was *The Lives of the Saints*, and he was conspicuous in the prison-church, where his voice (still strong and good) contributed to the choir. The big break in his life came with the arrival of a new batch of convicts, one of whom was from Aksionov's home town, and who knew about the imprisonment of his fellow city man—whom of course he did not recognize. Aksionov soon surmises, from comments made by the newcomer, that he is in fact the true murderer—who had stuck the bloodied knife in Aksionov's bag.

Decision Not long after his realization, about the true murderer, Aksionov finds himself in a difficult position in the prison. It has become clear that some prisoner has been planning to dig his way out of the jail. The evidence—mud collected in boots, etc.—is weighed and the prison authorities turn to Aksionov—by now widely respected in the prison for his saintliness—for a judgment on the guilt of the suspected Makar Semyonich; the true murderer. Though he knows Makar is guilty, Aksionov weighs the pros and cons of judging him, and decides to proclaim him innocent.

Resolution Overwhelmed with gratitude, for Aksionov's amazing gesture, Makar begs Aksionov for forgiveness, overcome by the other's grand decision. 'God will forgive you,' says Aksionov, 'and at these words his heart grew light, and the longing for home left him.' By an act of personal forgiveness, Aksionov had freed himself from decades of bitterness and isolation. By the time Makar, who went ahead and confessed his jail break plans, had been released, Aksionov was dead. But he was a free man, even in death. He seems to have found the magic words, which he spoke to Makar: 'Maybe I am a hundred times worse than you.'

Discussion questions

What is the highest point in Aksionov's life, as Tolstoy portrays it in this story?

Why, as Tolstoy sees it, does Aksionov not take justified revenge on Makar, when he is called on to judge the man?

What is the significance of the dream Aksionov's wife had, of impending disaster at the Fair?