

Rebecca Stanton

One Day, redux



Apr 17, 2014 6:20 PM

As you saw in the excerpt we read from *The Gulag Archipelago*, Solzhenitsyn thinks hard about how to shape the reader's experience of his texts -- and even how to mold the reader him-/herself, in the case of *Gulag Archipelago* remaking the reader in his own image as "*one who was there*." How does Solzhenitsyn mediate the reader's experience in *One Day*? What kind of reading does he want us to give this text, and what devices does he employ in order to attempt to force such a reading?

In short, I'm asking you to read resistantly -- to notice what Solzhenitsyn doesn't want you to notice and to be aware of what the text is up to, even if you ultimately opt to succumb to its ministrations. The following questions are designed to provoke such a reading. (Some of these questions were already touched upon during the discussion in Thursday's class.)

(1) As there has been in all our readings, there is some discussion of art in this text (Vdovushkin's poetry, pp. 23-4; the camp's painters, p. 30; the dyed "carpets," p. 42; and especially the conversation about Eisenstein's films and "art" in general, pp. 85-6): what conclusions about the nature and purpose of art emerge from the quarrel of Tsezar and Kh-123 (and other moments in the novella that you may identify as resonating with this argument)? To the extent that you can discern it, does Solzhenitsyn live by his own philosophy? (Consider for example the split-second "theatrical" timing of the scene on pp. 78-79.)

Many of our authors (in particular, Olesha, Kharms and Nabokov) have considered the relationship of art to reality quite explicitly; others have dealt implicitly with the same themes, and still others (like Pasternak) have engaged in a polemic with "Socialist Realism" by producing texts that conformed to some quite other sort of "realism" (or in which realism itself was at best a mirage). Where do you see Solzhenitsyn falling in this continuum? Is his text *mimetic* -- imitative of reality -- or not? What kind of "realism," if any, is he practising, and what steps does he take to achieve it?

(2) Now that you have finished the novella, what role do you see Solzhenitsyn's choices and the theme of "averageness" (this is just "one day" in a string of identical ones for Ivan Denisovich) as playing in its construction?

(3) The last few texts we've read featured protagonists who closely resemble their authors in occupation (writer), class (intelligentsia) and outlook (not very at home in Soviet reality). Solzhenitsyn, however -- himself an educated *intelligent* and a writer -- chooses an illiterate peasant as his protagonist. Why? What effect does this have on the text and its narration? Does it also affect our perception of the author himself?



This is the course blog.

(4) Where do you see intertexts at work in in the novella -- in particular, Zamyatin (see below), Dostoevsky (*Brothers Karamazov*), Plato (*Republic*), and Dante (*Inferno*), for those of you who have read them (please be generous in sharing your knowledge)? Are these important?

(5) Most of our texts have dealt with protagonists who were "outsiders" in some way -- or who, like Zamyatin's D-503, *became* "outsiders" in the course of the story. Is Shukhov an outsider? Why or why not?

(6) Why does Solzhenitsyn call his protagonist "Ivan Denisovich" in the title of the work but "Shukhov" throughout -- especially when his "official" name in the camp is actually Shch-854 (Щ-854, for the Cyrillic readers among you)?

(7) The text is quite "polyphonic," with many voices and conversations condensed into short sections of the text. Who are the most important voices whose views are represented? What can we learn from them -- or should we be sticking with Shukhov as the representative of a "normative" perspective in the text?

(8) What can you say about *time* and *space* in the novella? (We might start with the title -- One day in the life of Ivan Denisovich.) How is time measured? By whom? (Adele had an interesting comment in the previous discussion thread:

The technique of narrative time and actual time is used in this story is used in this story in odd ways. On the one hand, Ivan agonizes about Tsezar's cigarette over a two page long description of how he "longed for that cigarette more than freedom itself". (pg 30-32) On the other hand, on pg 67, Ivan is surprised that the "sun is high enough for dinnertime" and that "time flew when you're working."

Solzhenitsyn is definitely working with at least two different kinds of time in the narrative -- maybe more. In that same passage on p. 67, Shukhov reflects that "days in the camp rolled by before you knew it. Yet your sentence stood still, the time you had to serve never got any less." Further down the page, the zeks have a discussion that seems to contrast "natural time" (as told by the sun) with "official time" (as decreed by "the Soviet government"). Keep track of references to time (including clocks, calendars, etc), and see what you can make of them.

Says James [REDACTED] at Apr 17, 2014 7:23 PM

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There are a lot of questions for such a short novella, but here goes. Solzhenitsyn definitely makes a point that this day of the novella is no different than any other day in the life of the zeks. The novel does not have any climax which differs it from the other literary works we have studied such as *We* and *The Master and Margarita*. It is an introspective and dull book but of enormous interest. It is dull in the sense that gruel is dull, the labor is dull, the work an endless series of chores. The novella is constructed seamlessly since it only covers one day, and reminds me most of *Red Cavalry* in its pure honesty and strait forward and non-lyrical prose. Solzhenitsyn wants us to be absorbed in the novella and in a sense makes us zeks while reading it provoking a high degree on empathy among the readership. As far as Ivan Denisovich is concerned, Solzhenitsyn makes him anonymous almost like a fly on the wall. His purpose is to just be there and Solzhenitsyn wants to share

both his anonymity and empathy, silent and observing, documenting. Shukhov is too involved in the action to be an observer and Solzhenitsyn wants it to observe in order to remember rather than being carried along by the segmented action of the novella during a single day, which is like all the other single days. Solzhenitsyn thrives on monotony, yet creates an interesting novella out of this technique. Its shortness is its strength, and there it is wise to stick with Shukhov as the main protagonist because the novella cannot structurally support another protagonist. Time is measured, not in days but in years. Time for the zeks is endless, there is no end. Time therefore has no value because it cannot be measured and what is valued is food, warmth and indeed Ivan longed for Tsezari cigarette over two pages and "longed for that cigarette more than freedom itself." This is easy to understand because the cigarette was real and freedom only an illusion. I feel freedom is such a foreign concept that it is not even dreamed about. Families and friends are gone, and Solzhenitsyn wastes no time with them. Wives and children belong to others or to the state, and Solzhenitsyn expends little time in that single day expressing mourning for them. This is not because the families are dead but because the zeks are dead. Time is so important within the single day, but is irrelevant within the scope of the novella, the zeks' hopeless outlook for the future. Even time, or the position of the sun, is decreed by the Soviet which is the symbol of arrogant power while the life of the zeks symbolizes a total lack of power. Unlike D-103 in *We* who is the consummate insider the builder of the Integral, but who strove to become an outsider, Shukhov is the consummate insider, who knows and plays all the angles in order to survive. Those zeks who cannot adapt, and remain outsiders, eventually perish, not that Shukhov expects freedom for his domicile acquiesces to camp routine and camp rules. But he expects, as an insider, to live another day. We see the camp with the active eye of the insider which is necessary for the reader to comprehend the monotony of endless servitude. Clocks and calendars are useless appendages of the outside world which does not exist in the novella. Solzhenitsyn makes his protagonist not a writer but a peasant precisely because he does not want the novella to have an literary much less an intellectual point of view, not say the lyricism of the novella isn't literary, but its literary merit rests with its honesty and its ability to drive the reader into the horror of the labor camp. In this sense this small novella is more historical and honest than Pasternak's "Doctor Zhivago" which passes through history rather than embraces it.

Says Grace [REDACTED] at Apr 21, 2014 1:41 PM

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I think the form of Solzhenitsyn's work plays into its mimetic quality regarding life. For one thing, there are no breaks within the narrative. Unlike Pasternak's almost obsessive fragmentation, one incident blends with the next, suggesting the oppressive sense of eternity the prisoners feel. Solzhenitsyn then uses this blending technique to switch from mimesis to imitation (like Babel, as James says). For example, the hellish description of bricklaying gives way (with a punch (p. 101)), to a nod to Dostoevsky by weaving in the character Alyoshka the Baptist. This hint of the religious Alyosha from *The Brothers Karamazov* must be important to this scene—but how? Shenanigans continue as per their usual chaos; although a display of human spirit does crop up, with Solzhenitsyn's blending, this fades quietly away again, back into the eternal clomp of "donkey-work" (107). Could Solzhenitsyn be adding in these hints of other literature specifically to disappoint our expectations? This would heighten the feeling that work in prison deadens all things into one eternal mush.

Says Rebecca [REDACTED] at Apr 22, 2014 12:47 AM

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In response to (2), I don't know if this is an average day at all, and I don't think that Shukhov is an average prisoner—despite his illiteracy. It might be just one day, but it was a pretty damn good one: he'd gotten double his portion for both meals; he'd had a good job to do; he'd managed to escape detection with the blade he'd swiped; he'd gotten some tobacco, and bought some too; he got sugar, biscuits, and sausage from Tsezar; he wasn't sick or thrown in the hole (181). This was a good day, overall, not an average one. Shukhov may be smart enough to keep

himself out of the hole, but there are factors beyond his control (whether Tsezar gets a package that day, whether the guards are particularly brutal that day, whether the work he has to do is just awful that day), which demonstrates that his day could have just as easily been much worse. He was just lucky. What does it mean, then, to portray such a good day as an average one?

In terms of the "averageness" of Shukhov: I don't know if Solzhenitsyn is totally able to divorce himself from his main character. Shukhov may be an illiterate peasant, but he's nonetheless a smart man. We can see this in his observations (or are they the narrator's? how separate are Shukhov and the narrator?) that a convict's worst enemy is other convicts (131), or in his perceptive statement that prayers are like petitions because they're either ignored or outright rejected (175). Shukhov may not be educated, but these observations, and his quick and clever actions, show that he's not a stupid man.

He's a good man, too. Maybe, anyway. He acts altruistically--helping Tsezar, doing good work, etc--but much of it is done with the knowledge that it could help him in some way. No matter the motives, though, we see him doing things that no other zek does: he's the only one, for example, to help out Tsezar at the end of the night with his package, before roll call. He didn't have to, and the narration tells us that he didn't even do it to get something more from Tsezar--he did it because he pitied him (169). So no, I don't know how average Shukhov is. He isn't stupid like Buynovsky or blindly faithful like Alyosha; he isn't one of those sellout zeks with relatively comfy lives, or the vile Fetykov. He has principles. We get the sense that he, unlike many, will survive his sentence.

Says Michael [REDACTED] at Apr 22, 2014 2:05 AM [Remove this comment](#)

The Alyoshka in this novel seems to be a perversion of Alyosha in *Brothers Karamazov*. Alyosha Karamazov possesses an unwavering goodwill and shows compassion for everyone, no matter how they treat him. His naivete is exaggerated in the character of Alyoshka without any of Alyosha's sensitivity and intelligence. Shukhov observes that "you could tell from his voice and his eyes that he was glad to be in prison" (178). While Alyosha's strong faith played a positive role in *Brothers Karamazov*, here Solzhenitsyn is saying that religion cannot do as much in this world. He does not play a big role in this story and only receives "one biscuit" from Shukhov. So while Shukhov recognizes Alyoshka's value, Alyoshka's ineptitude demonstrates that it takes more than religion to get by in these camps.

One interesting comparison I noticed with *We* is how the protagonists relate to the outside world. In *We*, the world outside the gates represents mystery, hope, and fertility even. Here, it is nary given a thought. The main action related to the outside world comes with the packages. The main draw of the packages, though, is their contents, not the fact that they are from the outside. With the resolution of "no time for brooding on the past" (139), Shukhov tries to sever any emotional ties to the outside world and its packages. Perhaps one aim of these work camps is to work the prisoners so hard that they do not have the luxury to ruminate on what lies outside the camps, and as we see, Shukhov does not entertain serious thoughts of escaping.

Says Gabrielle [REDACTED] at Apr 22, 2014 10:05 AM [Remove this comment](#)

When the gang is working on building the wall (p. 97-100 ish), Shukhov really seems to lose himself in the process; all he thinks about is the work, forgetting everything outside this physical process. This seemed to me like a strange distortion of Levin's experience working in the fields in *"Anna Karenina."* While the terminology of oblivion and almost euphoria that overcome Levin are not present here, this sense of forgetting everything else when performing manual labor persists. However, Levin is working for himself and producing food; Shukhov is building a wall, but we don't really know what it's for or when it will be done. There is a senselessness to Shukhov's labor that destroys the inherent value to physical work that Levin seems to appreciate. Also, the reference to Stakhanovites (p. 96) seemed to me an ironic reference to the socialist realist ethic of building a new man (like in Andrzej Wajda's *"Man of Marble,"* if anyone has seen it!). But, again, the senselessness and futility of the labor undermines the sincerity of the reference and

highlights the disparity in conditions—and thus perhaps points towards the futility of the socialist project.

Also, we can't think about the troika carpet design that Shukhov's wife writes about (p. 43) without remembering Gogol. However, this intertextual reference is again a perversion, because the carpet is a cheap, inauthentic reproduction; art is replaced by kitsch. So, rather than bearing the symbolism that Gogol ascribed to it—a sense of Russia hurtling forward—this "fake" troika, like the purposeless and perpetually incomplete wall, seems to convey a false sense of forward motion, gesturing back to the impossibility of overcoming the confined setting of the camp.

Says Emma [REDACTED] at Apr 22, 2014 10:41 AM

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I will start with question (6) which asks why is Ivan Denisovich called "Shuhkov" throughout the novel instead of his real name? I think the answer to this is because he was only Ivan on the outside, and that Ivan no longer exists. The gulag has forcibly divorced him from who he used to be...it is appropriate that he is to go by a different name, as a symbol of the loss of his former life. Shuhkov is the prisoner, Shuhkov is Ш-854. Perhaps the name Shuhkov was created because of the sound of the letter (Ш) he was assigned (my elementary russian allows me to hypothesize that Shuhkov spelled in Russian could be Шухов)...Russians have a very vast array of nicknames for people (for example Sasha is a nickname for Aleksandr; Sasha being used because it plays off of the "sa" in AlekSAndr). The overall point being is that Ivan Denisovich existed at home with his family in his village, but he does not exist in the gulag. Ivan died outside the walls, while Shuhkov was born inside the gates.

Despite Ivan being Shuhkov inside the Gulag, the memories, and humanity of Ivan have not completely been masked by the instinct to survive. Thoughts from Ivan exist throughout the book, especially in his empathy for his fellow prisoners. One situation in particular displays the natures of both Ivan and Shuhkov; "He shot a glance at his neighbor's bowls. The man to his left had nothing but water. Dirty dogs -- treating fellow zeks like that!" (pg 153). This is Ivan talking, expressing sadness and disgust at his fellow prisoners being given unfair treatment (as some other prisoners bowls contain something other than water, meager though it may be). Compare this though to just 2 pages earlier, on page 151, when Shuhkov is clearly the person talking "He skillfully turned the tray so that he would be sitting at the corner with the two bowls of really thick skilly". Ivan feels sorry for the other prisoners who got cheated out of food, but Shuhkov is the one who is partially responsible for them not getting that food...Shuhkov is the survivor, while it can be imagined that Ivan is slowly dying during the many years, both the years past, and during the years to come.

One little note of comparison between *We* and *One Day* is that in both the *One State* and in the Gulag, people are named a letter followed by 3 numbers. Maybe this is significant, but perhaps not, as this might have been common throughout the world as a method of identifying prisoners.

Says Sydney [REDACTED] at Apr 22, 2014 11:42 AM

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Looking at the question of time and space in the novel is of interest to me. In the novel, it is stated that time is kept by the wardens and those in power and that the prisoners are not allowed to have watches. This idea that time is held and controlled by those in power is also echoed by the fact that they can add on years to a prisoners sentence, regardless if they have a legitimate reason to or not. Time, the in the minds of the prisoners, seems to be controlled by when they eat, sleep and wake. The time in which they do these things indicates to them what time of day it is. When they do not have these markers, time seems to move without their recognition. The second to last sentence in the book, "just one of the 3,6653 days of his sentence, from bell to bell" echoes the theme of time. it seems like time can move both rapidly, during the time in which the prisoners are working, and extremely slow when in the context of how long they will be prisoners. Solzhenitsyn does an interesting job in removing the reader's thoughts of time moving at a continual pace, to one in which the rate of time fluctuates.

Says Ingrid [REDACTED] at Apr 22, 2014 11:47 AM

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I definitely noticed the theme of averageness while reading the novel. In addition to the whole novel being an average, as it is just one day of many, the events of the day are somewhat average and unexciting. The huge section in the middle of the novel dedicated to describing bricklaying and the following section about the Zeks lining up to go back to the camp are somewhat tedious—I found myself wondering why it was necessary for such mundane things to be described in such detail. After finishing the novel, however, I think that dividing the novel up into realistic proportions (work was described for a longer time than dinner, for example) really added to the realism of the book. When I finished the book, I felt like I had experienced Shukov's day.

I think that this fits in well with the idea of space and time being used in odd ways. The amount of focus on little things in Shukov's day, such as tobacco and bedtime, seemed skewed. By taking more time to focus on certain aspects of Shukov's life, Solzhenitsyn brings our focus to what Shukov himself is thinking about and cares about. This technique makes the book feel a little more like a work of non-fiction. To know what is really important to Shukov, we can just look at what he is thinking about rather than looking closely for symbols and themes raised repeatedly.