

Written Assignment 1

Reflective Statement: How was your understanding of cultural and contextual considerations of the work developed through the Interactive Oral?

In the Interactive Oral we looked into subjects varying from the history of the book 'One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich' to the conditions in the labor camps that Shukhov was imprisoned in. This increased my understanding of the communist oppression situation and how the prisoners lived in the camp.

I gained more knowledge about the conditions that the prisoners in the labour camp had to endure throughout their sentence, as the facts about these conditions are rarely mentioned throughout the book. Being Nigerian, it is quite quite easy to relate to the situation that Shukhov finds himself in. The punishment for speaking negative about the government in Nigeria is not as severe, or as directly administered (there is no law that prevents this), but one could always find themselves being arrested for a crime they did not commit some days after. In one of the presentations it was said that Shukhov liked to do the work and due to the conditions in the camp, I can now understand why. Shukhov liked doing the work because it kept him busy and if he wasn't busy he could spend more time thinking about the situation he was in, which is quite depressing. One of the punishments for the prisoners was being locked in a room by themselves. At first thought, it was hard to view this as a punishment and I preferred it to do manual labour throughout the day, but then I realised it would be better to be at work - moving around would keep the prisoners warmer, and they have the company of others (which is crucial for mental survival in such a situation).

I also realised how the prisoners are stripped of their individuality. They must wear uniform, and the guards used letters and numbers to refer to the prisoners instead of using their names. This was perhaps a technique to make the prisoners 'new and improved' people, by removing traces of their old selves.

Written Assignment

Title: *How and to what effect does Solzhenitsyn exploit the physical environment in One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich?*

'One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich' is told from the perspective of the eponymous hero, and during the course of a short period of time, Ivan does not dwell on the injustice of his punishment. He struggles and fights to survive in the prison camp, as the weather was cold enough to kill any of the prisoners. The true characters and personalities of the prisoners were revealed, as the prisoners were forced to adapt to the prison camp and the physical environments within. This essay will explore how Solzhenitsyn uses the physical

environments in the prison camp and the influence of these environments on the prisoners.

In the prison camp, the cold was one of the difficulties the prisoners had to endure. It was continuous, relentless, and it was everywhere. The cold is introduced to readers as early as the second sentence, and this is done to emphasise its significance in the prison camp: “The intermittent sound barely penetrated the window panes on which the frost late two fingers thick...” This vivid description of how thick the window-panes were enables readers to visualise the physical environment the prisoners were forced to endure. Solzhenitsyn also uses repetition to emphasise just how cold it is and portray the hardship of the prisoners. He repeats the snow on the window-panes get again: “Anyway, it wasn't surprising that he'd felt cold in the night. The ice on the window-panes!” And then, “He'd managed to keep the cold out in most places, though his hands were numb in his worn mittens.” This emphasis on the cold reiterates that Shukhov and the other prisoners did well to stay alive in such conditions as they endeavour to cope with the temperatures. Shukhov has a physical reaction to the cold as he left the hut: “The cold made Shukhov gasp.” At this point, Shukhov had spent quite some time in the camp so one might think he should be used to the cold by now.

The relationship between the prisoners and the cold is presented as one of conflict. They are literally fighting for their lives: “The temperature out there was -27°C ; Shukhov's temperature was $+37^{\circ}\text{C}$. The fight was on.” Whilst Shukhov struggles with the conflict, the character Buinovsky seems to understand “the law of the taiga”; he states ‘You always get the sharpest frost at sunrise.’ Unlike Shukhov he seems to have become accustomed to the impact of the cold.

Shukhov uses the motif of work in the prison camps to show the dignity and integrity of the prisoners. They are shown to enjoy going to the workplace, for example, because it is one of the few times they can be free of the guards: “To get inside, that was all they wanted - there, no one had to teach them what to do.” The prisoners resemble animals, being forced to follow orders and longing for a period in which they can be free of commands. Solzhenitsyn exaggerates this point, twice repeating the phrase “that moment belonged to the prisoners.” The workplace is also attractive in that it provides temporary refuge from the cold: “Unwrap our foot-cloths and warm them a little...And now Shukhov and the other masons felt the cold no longer. Thanks to the urgent work, the first wave of heat had come over them...” Work becomes associated with literal, physical survival - an experience where they feel a sense of identity and where they can elapse the cruelties of the camp.

Solzhenitsyn uses the canteen where the prisoners eat to show their individual personalities. Shukhov, for example, considers the act of eating holy and clearly has respect for it. His approach is almost like a ritual: “He...removed his hat, put it in his left armpit...” and he believes that eating “is a moment that demands complete concentration.” This reveals Shukhov's sense of meticulousness and his desire to retain a degree of integrity. In contrast to other locations, where the prisoners are solely identified by the code stitched onto their jackets, in the canteen the prisoners are more individual. This is

shown in the description of Fetiukov, who “was the sort who when he was looking after someone else’s bowl took the potatoes from it”, which reveals his selfishness and lack of moral fibre. Even in the canteen, however, the prisoners are not free from unjust treatment: The cook didn't fancy carrying the sack of gross all three kilometres himself, so he got a ‘helper’ to carry it for him: better to give the ‘helper’ an extra portion at the zeks' expense than burden his own back. Solzhenitsyn may be implying that the prisoners were unable to escape unfair treatment.

Solzhenitsyn highlights that the prisoners were unjustly treated in the camp by showing that even in their barracks they were not safe. Their barracks, or ‘homes’ seem to be a place of danger and threat: the guards can enter at any time and demand that they be strip-searched. Solzhenitsyn also highlights that the barracks are places where nobody can be trusted, a place of thieving: “He made to put bread in his locker but again thought better of it...widened a little hole in the mattress and there, amidst the sawdust, concealed his half ration.” This suggests that even in the place they sleep, their ‘home’, the prisoners and to be cautious and wary of whom they can trust. In contrast, however, the barracks are also places companionship, in which relationships can be formed, as Shukhov says, “...He could rely on his mates to keep breakfast for him”, as he adapts to the environment and learns what he needs to in order to survive. This is further shown when Tsezar shares his food with Shukhov: “Tsezar raised a hand and gave him two biscuits, two lumps of sugar and a slice of sausage.” This shows that companionship was critical to surviving the camp.

In conclusion, the various physical environments show hardship in the prison camp. Solzhenitsyn uses the environment to highly the difficult time the prisoners were forced to endure. Struggling to stay alive because of the cold and lack of food, and being forced to work, are the great difficulties the prisoners underwent; adapting to those difficulties and surviving each day was a huge achievement for them.