God Sees the Truth But Waits

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF LEO TOLSTOY

Lev Nikolayevich (Leo) Tolstoy was born to an aristocratic Russian family in 1828. He studied oriental languages and then law at the university of Kazan, and he developed an interest in literature, ethics, and philosophy, including works by western European intellectuals such as the 18th-century French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Tolstoy eventually dropped out of university and began writing while living a lifestyle of gambling and heavy drinking. In 1851 Tolstoy became an artillery officer in the Crimean War, and in 1854-1855 he was involved in the siege of Sevastopol, an experience that inspired him to write the *Sevastopol Sketches*, which highlight the devastation and senselessness of war and form the basis for Tolstoy's later novel *War and Peace*. Following the war, Tolstoy left the army; he eventually became a staunch pacifist. Between 1863 and 1877 Tolstoy composed his two most famous works, *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*. His honest depictions of Russian society and politics in these works have led to his being considered a member of the so-called "realist" school. During the 1870s, Tolstoy fell into a deep spiritual crisis driven by a sense of purposelessness and a fear of death, and he turned toward intense religiosity. Tolstoy became highly critical of the Russian Orthodox church, and in 1901 he was excommunicated. Tolstoy turned his attention to writing religiously-focused literature, including essays on Christ's teachings, a synthesis of the four gospels, and didactic (or instructive) moral tales. During this period, he wrote *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, about a man confronting his mortality. Throughout his later writings Tolstoy continued to attack the church and social (or state) institutions, particularly the justice system (as in "God Sees the Truth But Waits"). Additionally, he renounced much of his past work, including *War and Peace*, as he determined to write not for the educated elite, but for the common people and for children. Tolstoy died of pneumonia in 1910.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Tolstoy lived during a period of drastic social and political change in Russia. The mid-19th century saw rapid industrialization (including the spread of railways), major reforms to the judicial system, and an ongoing debate over the degree to which Russia should orient itself towards Europe, which had been transformed by the spread of liberalism and by a series of revolutions against monarchies in 1848. Additionally, in 1861 Emperor Alexander II oversaw the emancipation of serfs, which gave freedom and expanded rights to over 20 million people. Though born to an aristocratic family, Tolstoy came to idealize the peasantry (increasingly writing for an audience of common people) and harshly criticized institutions of the Russian state, including those that supported the nobility; for example, Tolstoy opposed private land ownership. Tolstoy founded schools for peasants' children on his family estate of Yasnaya Polyana, and argued for a more egalitarian approach to education. Tolstoy is generally regarded as one of several Russian "realist" authors (including Ivan Turgenev and Fyodor Dostoyevsky) whose works closely reflected social and political developments and provided honest depictions of life among different social classes. His real-life focus on social institutions is evident in "God Sees the Truth, But Waits," which critiques the criminal justice system and contrasts institutional justice with a Christian view of divine judgment.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"God Sees the Truth But Waits" is closely related to Tolstoy's prior work *War and Peace*, the publication of which was completed approximately three years earlier (in 1869). Firstly, the story is a reworking of a fable, narrated by a peasant named Platon ("Plato") Karatayev, that appears near the end of *War and Peace* and illustrates the maxim, "Where the law is at work, so is falsehood." In Platon's fable, a wrongly-imprisoned old man encounters in Siberia the man who actually committed the crime for which he was convicted; the true criminal expresses his remorse, asks for the old man's forgiveness, and admits his guilt to the authorities, but there is ultimately no justice on earth for the old man, as official permission for his release arrives after he has already passed away. Secondly, "God Sees the Truth, But Waits," represents a reaction by Tolstoy against his prior works, especially *War and Peace*. During the 1870s Tolstoy renounced this novel and decided that he should no longer write for an audience of elite intelligentsia; "God Sees the Truth, But Waits," was written principally for children, as Tolstoy sought to compose a multi-text primer that would edify the young with life lessons and moral instruction.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** God Sees the Truth But Waits (A Fable)
- **Where Written:** Russia
- **When Published:** 1872
- **Literary Period:** Russian realism
- **Genre:** Short story, parable
- **Setting:** Russia and Siberia
- **Climax:** Makar Semyonov confesses to framing Aksyonov for

the murder of Aksyonov's merchant friend.

- **Antagonist:** State officials (including soldiers, a district police commander, and a governor) and, more generally, social institutions of justice and punishment
- **Point of View:** Third person

EXTRA CREDIT

Holy Book. Whereas Tolstoy came to disavow his famous novel *War and Peace*, he considered "God Sees the Truth, But Waits," to be one of his greatest literary accomplishments and an ideal realization of "religious art." In his 1897 work *What is Art?* Tolstoy declares, "I consign my own artistic production to the category of bad art, excepting the story, 'God Sees the Truth, But Waits,' which seeks a place in the first class (religious art)."

PLOT SUMMARY

The story opens with the relatively young Aksyonov, a well-to-do merchant, living with his family in the town of Vladimir, Russia. Aksyonov is jovial, handsome, and talented at **singing**, and he owns two shops and a house; however, he has a habit of excessive drinking. As Aksyonov prepares to set off for the summer commercial Fair at Nizhny, his wife urges him to stay home, telling him that she has experienced a bad portent—a nightmare in which his **hair** turned completely gray. Aksyonov assumes that his wife is worried about his drinking and laughs off her concerns.

Halfway into his journey to Nizhny, Aksyonov meets a merchant friend at an inn for tea. He and his friend both spend the evening at the inn, and in the morning Aksyonov continues on his way. During a break in the journey, as Aksyonov feeds his horse and plays his guitar, a state official suddenly arrives with two soldiers and begins questioning Aksyonov, focusing on the prior evening and on Aksyonov's interactions with his merchant friend. When a bewildered Aksyonov inquires as to what is going on, the official introduces himself as the district police inspector and informs Aksyonov that his merchant friend was murdered at the inn. The inspector orders a search of Aksyonov's belongings and discovers a bloodstained knife. A terrified Aksyonov quakes, stammers, and swears desperately that the knife is not his, but the police inspector formally accuses Aksyonov of murdering the merchant and of stealing 20,000 rubles. Aksyonov is physically bound and escorted to jail.

In jail, Aksyonov is visited by his grief-stricken wife, who collapses upon seeing her husband in prison clothes and fetters. Aksyonov's wife informs him that his last hope of exoneration and release—a petition to the tsar—has been rejected. She reminds Aksyonov that she foresaw his troubles in a nightmare, and to Aksyonov's horror and astonishment, asks him point-blank whether he actually committed the murder. Aksyonov is devastated by his wife's suspicion of his guilt. As a soldier separates Aksyonov from his wife and children for the last time, Aksyonov concludes that he can only expect justice and mercy from God—not from anyone on Earth, even family members. This marks a turning point after which Aksyonov begins to pray fervently and turns towards a strictly spiritual life.

After being flogged, Aksyonov is sent to a Siberian labor camp, where he remains for 26 years. In a fulfillment of his wife's prophecy, his hair turns completely gray and he becomes physically fragile, acquiring a stoop. Aksyonov becomes intensely devout and acquires the prison monikers of "Grandpa" and "Man of God," reflecting both his piety and his bodily deterioration. He spends his prison earnings on a Saint's Calendar and spends much of his time in the jail's chapel, reading the gospels and singing in the choir. Aksyonov never again hears from his wife and children, but he gains the respect of his fellow inmates, who trust him to mediate disputes and file appeals on their behalf to the state authorities.

One day, Aksyonov hears a recently-arrived inmate named Makar Semyonov announce that he comes from Vladimir, Aksyonov's hometown. Aksyonov asks for word of his family; Makar replies that he has heard of them as well-to-do people whose head of household is incarcerated in Siberia. Makar asks Aksyonov what he was sentenced for; Aksyonov says only that he is paying for his prior sins, but his fellow inmates tell Makar the story of the merchant who was murdered and of how Aksyonov was framed for the killing. Upon hearing this, Makar suddenly seems to recognize Aksyonov, expressing surprise that he and Aksyonov have met again after so many years; Makar's reaction leads Aksyonov to speculate that Makar might know who truly murdered the merchant at the inn. When Makar responds by claiming that the true culprit has never been caught, Aksyonov begins to suspect that it was in fact Makar who framed him for the murder.

Aksyonov's suspicion of Makar sends him spiraling into a terrible depression. Aksyonov pictures his long-lost wife and children and reflects upon his false imprisonment, the now-lost light-heartedness of his youth, and the brutality (and injustice) of his punishment. Aksyonov becomes so dejected that he contemplates suicide, a horrific Christian sin, and feels tempted to take his revenge against Makar by attacking him.

One night, Aksyonov comes across Makar digging an escape tunnel under the wall of the prison. When soldiers discover this tunnel the very next day, the governor arrives on the scene and begins questioning the prisoners. When the governor questions Aksyonov, he praises Aksyonov as a spiritual man who always tells the truth. Aksyonov thinks about informing on Makar as revenge for Makar's setting him up but ultimately concludes that he does not wish to see Makar flogged (the same penalty Aksyonov received), especially if his suspicion of Makar turns out to be misplaced. Aksyonov lies to the

Governor, saying that he witnessed nothing and that he does not know who dug the escape tunnel.

The following night, Aksyonov finds Makar sitting at the foot of his bed. Makar, deeply affected by Aksyonov's decision to protect him, desperately begs Aksyonov for forgiveness and confesses that he is the true murderer of the merchant at the inn. In addition, Makar admits to having framed Aksyonov by placing the bloody knife in his bag. Makar promises Aksyonov that in exchange for forgiveness he will confess his crime to the authorities, presumably leading to Aksyonov's official exoneration. Aksyonov responds with anger, insisting that even if he were to be released from prison he would still be miserable, as he would have no home or family to return to. However, Makar persists in begging Aksyonov's pardon; he bursts out sobbing and shares with Aksyonov how shameful he feels knowing that a man for whom he caused such suffering took pity on him and safeguarded him from the authorities. As Makar weeps, Aksyonov begins sobbing as well and assures his fellow prisoner that God will forgive him. With this, Aksyonov affirms his ultimate trust in God to forgive, deliver real justice, and reward genuine devotion with salvation. This is the principal lesson of the story, invoked by the title: God sees the truth, but waits to balance the moral scales in the afterlife.

Aksyonov suddenly feels his heart lighten, and thoughts of his death and of the afterlife replace his painful longing for home and for relief from prison (that is, earthly concerns). Though Aksyonov urged Makar to concentrate on God as the source of forgiveness, Makar nevertheless admits to the state authorities that it was he, and not Aksyonov, who murdered the merchant, and Aksyonov is officially approved for release from prison. By the time permission for Aksyonov's release reaches Siberia, however, Aksyonov has died, passing into the afterlife, where worldly authority ends and God is the only source of justice.

CHARACTERS

Ivan Dmitriyevich Aksyonov – Aksyonov is the protagonist of the "God Sees the Truth, But Waits." At the outset of the story he is a youthful and prosperous merchant in the town of Vladimir, Russia, where he lives with his wife and children, enjoys occasional bouts of drinking, and owns two shops and a house. On the way to the commercial Fair at Nizhny, Aksyonov meets his merchant friend for tea at an inn. The next day, Aksyonov learns that his friend has been killed and Aksyonov is wrongly arrested for murdering him when the police find a bloody knife in his bag. This begins a long ordeal that escalates from his being separated from his family to his being flogged and sentenced to hard labor in Siberia. During Aksyonov's 26th year at the labor camp, he meets and inmate named Makar Semyonov who suspiciously seems to recognize him. When Makar attempts to escape the camp, Aksyonov covers for him by lying to the Governor. This act of kindness that prompts Makar to guiltily confess that it was he who murdered the merchant and framed Aksyonov for the crime by planting the bloody knife. At first, Aksyonov is angry, but he decides to forgive Makar and assures him that God, too, will forgive him. This display of strength spurs a spiritual awakening in Aksyonov, and trusts that God knows the truth and will deliver due justice in the afterlife. Eventually, Makar confesses and Aksyonov is finally pardoned for his crimes, but he dies in the labor camp before he can be released. By the time of his death, he is fully committed to being a "Man of God," as his fellow prisoners call him, and he has accepted his journey of persecution and suffering as an opportunity to atone for past sins and to achieve salvation by pursuing a life of deep spiritual devotion.

Makar Semyonov – Makar Semyonov arrives as a new inmate at the Siberian labor camp where Aksyonov is incarcerated during Aksyonov's 26th year there. After Aksyonov discusses with Makar the murder for which he was falsely imprisoned and learns that Makar too comes from the town of Vladimir, Aksyonov begins to suspect that it was Makar who set him up. Aksyonov inwardly rages at Makar, but after one day discovering that Makar was digging an escape tunnel, Aksyonov nonetheless declines to give him up to the authorities, reasoning that he would not like to see Makar flogged (the same brutal punishment he himself received). This triggers a transformation in Makar's character; whereas Makar arrived at the Siberian prison loudly protesting his innocence, he now confesses privately to Aksyonov that it was he who framed Aksyonov for murder. Moved by Aksyonov's refusal to turn him in, Makar begs Aksyonov's forgiveness. Though Aksyonov initially reacts with indignation, Makar's apparently genuine sense of grief and regret over the wrong he has done Aksyonov eventually brings Aksyonov to tears. Aksyonov assures Makar that God will forgive him. Aksyonov's decision not to himself forgive (or, indeed, to punish) Makar but to refer Makar to the promise of divine forgiveness sets up the main moral lesson of the parable—that true justice comes from God alone, not from individuals on earth. Makar further highlights this message when he ultimately confesses to state authorities that it was he, and not Aksyonov, who murdered the merchant at the inn. Aksyonov's official exoneration arrives after he dies and passes into God's divine judgment, and therefore Makar's attempts to enact due justice have no effect.

Aksyonov's Merchant Friend – Aksyonov's unnamed merchant friend is the victim of the murder for which Aksyonov is falsely imprisoned. He and Aksyonov have tea together while staying at the same inn en route to Nizhny (the location of a commercial fair) and is found dead the next day. Aksyonov's friend represents Aksyonov's social connections and ties to community. That Aksyonov is relatively well-known and socially connected is confirmed later in the story, when the police question the people of Vladimir about the then-suspect

Aksyonov, and the townspeople all seem to respect him but also know rather intimate details about him, such as his tendency to drink. The social ties illustrated by Aksyonov's interactions with his merchant friend stand in sharp contrast to Aksyonov's solitude before God and detachment from earthly concerns at the conclusion of the story.

Aksyonov's Wife – At the beginning of the story, Aksyonov's wife has a vague premonition of the suffering that awaits Aksyonov when she has a nightmare in which her husband's beautiful curly **hair** turns completely gray. She encourages Aksyonov to remain home rather than leave his family for the Fair at Nizhny. Later, Aksyonov's wife reappears to visit her husband after he has been wrongly jailed for murdering his merchant friend. She informs Aksyonov that his appeals to state authorities have been exhausted and shocks him by expressing suspicion of his guilt. Following these two encounters, Aksyonov's wife casts a long shadow over his thoughts during his incarceration in Siberia, as he is constantly pulled away from his strict spirituality back to worldly concerns by the painful image of her and their children back home in Vladimir. Aksyonov's wife embodies the potent emotional pull of family and of home—perhaps the strongest forces keeping Aksyonov attached to social, earthly matters and restraining his journey to focus fully on spiritual development, atonement for his sins, and the goal of salvation in the afterlife.

The Governor – Like the district police inspector who appears earlier on in the story, the Governor is known only by his title. This establishes him as a symbol of state authority and institutional justice, which Aksyonov decidedly rejects in recognizing the sole authority of God to deliver judgments and to right moral wrongs. When Makar Semyonov's prison tunnel discovered, the Governor arrives and questions Aksyonov as to who is trying to escape. Even though the Governor appeals to Aksyonov's spiritual righteousness, saying that Aksyonov has a good reputation and always tells the truth, Aksyonov refuses to inform on Makar and lies to the Governor, insisting that he knows nothing about the escape attempt. Tolstoy thus uses the character of the Governor to show Aksyonov's rejection of social, institutional justice (embodied by the Governor) in favor of the ultimate prerogative of God to judge individuals' souls.

The District Police Inspector – It is the district police inspector, who is importantly known only by his title and not by his name, who questions Aksyonov, accuses him of murder, and then orders him to be detained. The inspector acts as an embodiment of the corrupt nature of state institutions, especially those that purport to deliver justice. In his use of physical force and restraint against Aksyonov, he is a symbol of a justice system revolving around bodily punishment, in contrast to God's judgment of the soul.

THEMES

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INSTITUTIONAL JUSTICE VS. DIVINE JUDGMENT

Composed as a parable, or didactic moral tale, for children, "God Sees the Truth, But Waits" follows the false accusation and imprisonment of a merchant named Aksyonov for a murder that he did not commit. As state officials—a police inspector, soldiers, and even the tsar—participate in Aksyonov's wrongful punishment, a brutal flogging followed by 26 years of hard labor in Siberia, Tolstoy sets up a highly visible contrast between the state institutions of law and justice that strip Aksyonov of his liberty and the ultimate, reliable moral judgment of God. As Aksyonov's appeals to state authorities fail, he increasingly turns towards a life of religious devotion, trusting (as Tolstoy puts it in the title) that God sees the truth of his innocence and will eventually reward his steadfast faith by restoring moral order. With this, the story suggests that while earthly justice may fail, one should place his or her hope in divine justice.

The process by which Aksyonov is accused of murder and loses his freedom revolves principally around an encounter with an unnamed "district police inspector" who acts as a symbol of state authority and reveals institutional justice to be deeply flawed. At first glance, this inspector's handling of Aksyonov appears to follow the outlines of a legitimate investigative-legal procedure. He begins with an interrogation, conducts a search of Aksyonov's possessions, levels an accusation of guilt, and finally orders the arrest of his subject. Upon closer inspection, however, Tolstoy uses the inspector to represent a system of institutional justice—in contrast to the higher divine judgment that becomes Aksyonov's focus during his imprisonment—that can be reduced to physical and psychological force and to the leveraging of state power against an effectively defenseless individual subject. The inspector arrives on the scene accompanied by two soldiers, and although Aksyonov responds fully and truthfully to all of the inspector's queries, the inspector nevertheless cuts short his dialogue with Aksyonov and invites the intervention of the soldiers, pivoting towards the exercise of force. He asks Aksyonov to "show me your belongings," but before Aksyonov has a chance to oblige him, the police inspector commands the soldiers to "search him!" The soldiers' intervention, along with the shock of seeing the bloodstained knife (which Tolstoy's audience knows to be a planted piece of evidence), abolishes Aksyonov's voice and with it his capacity to mount a defense: "his voice kept breaking, his

face was ashen and he was quaking all over with fear, just like a guilty man." Having reduced Aksyonov to a state of physical paralysis, the inspector now cites the very symptoms of fear that he and his soldiers have induced as evidence of Aksyonov's guilt: "I can see you're guilty from your face."

In the moments following his formal accusation of Aksyonov, the inspector rapidly escalates his use of force, "order[ing] the soldiers to tie [Aksyonov] up and take him to the cart." Aksyonov can no longer speak at all; he expresses his grief through the nonverbal gestures of "cross[ing] himself and burst[ing] into tears." Now under the absolute physical control of state officials, Aksyonov is shipped off to be flogged—a corporal punishment so destructive, Tolstoy notes, that Aksyonov must be given time to heal before he can be transported to Siberia.

As Aksyonov ages in Siberia (acquiring the moniker of "Grandpa," as well as of "Man of God"), he turns away from the world, realizing that true justice revolves around faith and the fate of the soul, rather than the physical control and punishment that defines institutional justice and authority. The opposition of institutional versus divine justice—and the total superiority of the latter—is stated perhaps most explicitly in Aksyonov's reasonings after his disturbing meeting with his wife, in which she questions his innocence and informs him that his appeals to the authorities have failed: "He told himself, 'Obviously, no one except God can know the truth…only from Him should I ask for help, from Him alone can I expect mercy.' And from that time onwards Aksyonov stopped sending in petitions, stopped hoping and simply prayed to God." With this, Aksyonov fully internalizes the flawed, flimsy nature of earthly justice, realizing that he can trust only God to see his innocence.

Towards the end of his life, in Siberia, Aksyonov catches his fellow prisoner Makar Semyonov digging an escape tunnel. Aksyonov recognizes Makar as the actual perpetrator of the murder for which he was imprisoned; nevertheless, Aksyonov chooses not to turn Makar in to the authorities. This decision can be seen as a rejection of earthly justice and punishment, symbolized (as with the police inspector) by a state official known only by his title—the Governor. Tolstoy makes it clear that Aksyonov has not completely forgiven Makar by the time the Governor asks him, "Who was trying to dig a tunnel?" Yet Aksyonov decides to answer untruthfully ("I saw nothing, and I know nothing") after reasoning not just that his suspicion of Makar might be misplaced, but that "they're bound to flog him if I testify against him." In other words, even if Makar is the one who "ruined" Aksyonov, the official punishment of flogging to which Aksyonov himself was subjected would be (in Aksyonov's mind) unjust and unacceptable under any circumstances.

In a private moment after the Governor has gone, Aksyonov assures Makar that "God will forgive you." This statement, together with Aksyonov's deceitful response to the Governor, serves as a rejection of (and act of resistance to) the very idea of the Governor's authority—an affirmation that delivering true justice is a prerogative of God's upon which no human has the right to impinge. And although Makar confesses to the murder for which Aksyonov was jailed, by the time "official permission finally came for Aksyonov to return he had passed away," leaving the state's jurisdiction and moving into the afterlife, where God ultimately dispenses rewards and punishments.

FAITH AND DEVOTION

From the beginning of the story to the end, Aksyonov undergoes a dramatic development from a good-natured but casually sinful man concentrated largely on materialistic pursuits to a true "Man of God" (as his fellow inmates call him) absorbed almost exclusively in spirituality and the pursuit of salvation. Tolstoy very clearly establishes Aksyonov as a spiritual exemplar (or icon) by tracking the ways in which Aksyonov's persecution and suffering lead him to atone for his sins, recognize the absolute authority of God, and pursue a strictly religious life.

At the outset of the story Tolstoy provides a description of Aksyonov's personality and lifestyle in Vladimir, Aksyonov's hometown, that associates Aksyonov with immaturity, materialism (as opposed to spirituality), indulgence, and occasional sin. Perhaps the primary marker of Aksyonov's indulgence and sin is his drinking. As a young man, Aksyonov "drank a great deal and when he was tipsy he would go on the rampage. But after he married he gave up drinking and there were only occasional lapses." That these occasional lapses are presented here in a positive light suggests that Aksyonov held himself to a relatively low standard of behavior. Aksyonov does not seem to care at all about the consequences of his indulgence: when his wife predicts his downfall during the trip to Nizhny by telling him that she has had a nightmare, "Aksyonov laughs and retorted: 'You're really scared that I might start drinking at the Fair, aren't you?'" In sharp contrast to the attitude he acquires over the course of his imprisonment in Siberia—that he deserves to be punished and must pay dearly for his sins—Aksyonov here views his sinful behavior as trivial and innocent enough.

Aksyonov's initial worldliness is also captured in his materialistic career as a merchant, symbolized by his journey to the "Fair at Nizhny," the commercial center of Russia. Aksyonov has clearly concentrated on socioeconomic success and on acquiring property: "He owned two shops and a house," and Makar Semyonov (who is also from Vladimir) tells Aksyonov in Siberia that he has heard of Aksyonov's family as "well-to-do people." Additionally, when Aksyonov shares his goals for the Nizhny Fair with his wife, he says: "I'll do some good business there, make a nice little profit and then I can bring you back some expensive presents!" With this, Aksyonov speaks not simply of making ends meet, but of acquiring luxuries and

excess.

Unlike his lifestyle in Vladimir, Aksyonov emerges as an ideal man of faith during his time in Siberia, concentrating intensely on devotional practices. His fundamental change of character and of purpose offers to the main didactic (or instructive) example of the parable; Tolstoy intends readers to see Aksyonov as a model to emulate. That Aksyonov's priorities have changed is evident in the detail that "in prison Aksyonov learnt how to make boots and with the money he earned he bought a Saints' Calendar and read it whenever he had enough light." It is significant that Aksyonov spends his money on this religious literature—an important tool for edification and prayer. Whereas before Aksyonov spent his earnings as a merchant on shops and luxuries, now he puts it towards his faith. By the end of the story "all he [Aksyonov] thought of was his last hour…" This sweeping statement leaves no doubt that by the time of his death Aksyonov had fully detached himself from social bonds and from worldly concerns and turned his attention towards preparing his soul for the Christian afterlife.

Importantly for the didactic purpose of the story, Aksyonov's transformation from worldly and sinful to spiritual and moral is far from linear; he experiences difficult lapses and tests of faith along the way, and he ultimately proves his devotion. When Aksyonov meets Makar Semyonov, the man he suspects framed him for murder, he experiences the negative emotions of rage and a desire for revenge: "He could have attacked him [Makar] on the spot, and taken his revenge. All night long he recited prayers, but it did not calm him down." Aksyonov even considers suicide, a terrible sin in the context of his Christian faith. However, Aksyonov passes this religious trial, deciding to leave Makar's judgment in the hands of God: upon assuring Makar, "God will forgive you […] suddenly his [Aksyonov's] heart became lighter." It is at this moment that Aksyonov truly jettisons all worldly concerns and envisions "his last hour"—that is, his passage to heaven and the promise of salvation.

In its emphasis on Aksyonov's development from a sinful merchant in Vladimir to a mature, model "Man of God" after 26 trying years in Siberia, the story can also be seen as borrowing from hagiography, the body of literature in which saints' lives (and exceptional devotional acts) are retold for religious edification. Hagiography circulated widely in the Russian church and followed closely behind the Gospels in use and influence. Moreover, like "God Sees the Truth, But Waits," hagiographies tended to emphasize saints' development into models of devotion, often through episodes of persecution that served as tests of faith. In fact, Tolstoy invokes the importance of hagiography by noting that Aksyonov "bought a Saints' Calendar" in jail; a saint's calendar generally contains a collection of hagiographies meant to be read on saints' feast days. Tolstoy may be referring specifically to a collection of hagiographies compiled by the Muscovite Metropolitan Makary, who lived in the 15th and 16th centuries.

Even though Aksyonov rejects the legitimacy of the state institutions that jailed him, he tells others that the reason he is suffering in Siberia is "to pay for my sins," rather than, say, due to a wrongful conviction. In other words, Aksyonov comes to acknowledge that his incarceration is in fact legitimate when viewed through a spiritual lens. With this, Aksyonov conceptualizes his tribulations as a test of faith that gives him an opportunity to achieve salvation by reforming his character and devoting his life to God.

FAMILY

Over the course of "God Sees the Truth, But Waits," Aksyonov's progress towards detaching himself from society and becoming a true, spiritually oriented "Man of God" is frequently tested by his connection to his family, which Tolstoy depicts as one of the most powerful sources of societal and earthly attachment. Aksyonov's journey towards a life of pure devotion necessarily begins with a separation from his family in the town of Vladimir, and as his ordeal takes him further and further away from them, his wife and children exert an increasingly potent pull that returns him, on multiple occasions, to worldly concerns. In fact, Aksyonov's encounters with (and reflections upon) his family act as vital checkpoints in the narrative structure of the story, providing measurements of Aksyonov's progress towards sanctity and the afterlife. By the end of the story, Aksyonov finally makes peace with having lost his family, whom he now sees as a cause of earthly attachment, and accepts his ultimate solitude before God. With this, Tolstoy indicates that family, although a positive force in some ways, keeps people rooted in this world and preoccupied with worldly concerns, rather than focused on God.

Before his ordeal of losing his family begins, Aksyonov ironically appears to take his family for granted. The youthful Aksyonov fails to fully appreciate his earthly possessions, relationships, and privileges. At the outset of the story, Aksyonov's wife shares with him that she has had a nightmare in which his **hair** turned completely gray (a frightening portent), and she begs him to stay home: "Please don't go now [to the Fair at Nizhny], Ivan Dmitriyevich, I've had a bad dream about you." Nevertheless, Aksyonov twice laughs her off, telling her not to worry. The ease with which he dismisses her concerns and then leaves his family for the fair highlights the degree to which Aksyonov (in his youth) takes his social bonds, especially that with his family, for granted, as reliable facts of life. That Aksyonov cares for his family but may not fully appreciate them is also suggested by the line at the start of the text, "After [Aksyonov] married he gave up drinking and there were only occasional lapses." Though his commitment to his wife was enough to stop him from drinking "a great deal," his "occasional lapses" and mockery of his wife for her sincere concern about his drinking ("You're really scared I might start drinking at the

Fair, aren't you?") hint that Aksyonov is not receptive to his wife's wishes and perhaps upset her in the past with his drunken behavior.

After Aksyonov is imprisoned and increasingly alienated from his family, his thoughts about (and desires for) his wife and children rapidly intensify, and thus his family becomes an increasingly powerful force testing his commitment to detaching himself from worldly matters in favor of a spiritual life. Shortly after being accused and imprisoned, Aksyonov has a second, this time deeply affecting, meeting with his wife. This jailhouse encounter between Aksyonov and his wife depicts the bond of family as a potent emotional connection: Aksyonov's wife is overwhelmed by the sight of her husband in fetters ("she collapsed and it was some time before she came to her senses"), and Aksyonov is devastated when his wife expresses suspicion that he actually committed the crime for which he was incarcerated. This scene concludes with Aksyonov's being permanently cut off from his family: "Aksyonov bade his family farewell for the last time." It is only once this final detachment has occurred that Aksyonov is able and motivated at last to acknowledge the moral of the story, that "no one except God can know the truth," and pivot towards a rigidly devout lifestyle. This indicates that among all earthly bonds restricting Aksyonov's commitment to God, that of family is the most resilient.

Aksyonov's jailhouse visit with his wife reinforces the association of family bonds with social obligation, from which Aksyonov must liberate himself en route to becoming a genuine "Man of God." For example, Aksyonov's wife felt obliged to file appeals with the tsar on his behalf even though she suspected that he was guilty, and Aksyonov's comment to his wife, "How could you possibly think that I did it?" hints at an expectation of obligatory support and confidence on the part of one spouse towards the other.

The intense pull of family returns to challenge Aksyonov's psychological state in prison and jeopardize his commitment to an otherworldly, spiritual life. When Aksyonov learns that Makar Semyonov, his fellow prisoner, comes from Vladimir, he immediately "pricked up his ears and asked: [...] 'did you ever hear of some merchants in Vladimir by the name of Aksyonov?'" Clearly, Aksyonov still wonders about his wife and children, and this keeps his mind on earthly concerns. After Aksyonov begins to suspect that Makar committed the murder for which he was convicted, Aksyonov's first, agonizing thoughts run to his family: "He visualized his wife as she had looked when she saw him off for the last time [...] Then he pictured his children as they had been then [...]" Tolstoy draws out these reflections by Aksyonov on his family, emphasizing how deeply moving and valuable these bonds of kin can be, and yet at the very same time he highlights the drawbacks (even dangers) of these thoughts in a Christian sense, as they lead Aksyonov to contemplate the horrific sin of suicide: "All this he [Aksyonov] recalled and he became so dejected he felt like putting an end to his life there and then."

At the culmination of Aksyonov's journey—captured in the lines, "Suddenly his heart became lighter. No longer did he pine for home [...] All he thought of was his last hour..."—Tolstoy connects the fulfillment of Aksyonov's spiritual development, or complete reorientation towards God and the afterlife, with a definitive detachment from his desire for home and family.

FORGIVENESS

In "God Sees the Truth, But Waits," forgiveness emerges as a central concept in the story's project of edifying readers. By showing the repeated failure, incompletion, or withholding of forgiveness in earthly (or social) contexts, Tolstoy suggests that the only ultimately reliable and worthwhile form of forgiveness is that of atonement from God, in which Aksyonov learns to trust. Importantly, Tolstoy never explicitly narrates the fulfillment of Aksyonov's spiritual forgiveness; he simply presents a protagonist (Aksyonov) who embodies deep faith that this forgiveness will arrive and who understands that true, meaningful forgiveness can only be sought from God. While all worldly attempts at forgiveness in the story fall short, Tolstoy ultimately suggests that one must overcome the thought that forgiveness is an empty idea and learn to trust, along with Aksyonov, that "God Sees the Truth, But Waits" and will eventually forgive those who live a life of devotion.

The story's major reflection upon the idea of forgiveness occurs in Aksyonov's interactions with Makar Semyonov, who frames Aksyonov for murder and ends up incarcerated in Siberia alongside Aksyonov some 26 years later. Tolstoy devotes much of the narrative to an encounter between Aksyonov and Makar after Aksyonov, who suspects Makar for having set him up, nonetheless declines to turn Makar into the authorities for digging an escape tunnel. Tolstoy makes it clear that Aksyonov's decision to protect Makar does not amount to forgiveness: Aksyonov thinks, "Why should I forgive the man who ruined me [...] ? [...] Let him pay the price for all my suffering." Aksyonov protects Makar because he does not wish to see anyone flogged and realizes that "my suspicions [of Makar] may be wrong."

Makar becomes desperate to obtain forgiveness from Aksyonov, and this desperation emanates from a sense of extreme moral imbalance between him and Aksyonov; Aksyonov has done good to him, whereas he has done harm to Aksyonov. The type of worldly, interpersonal forgiveness that Makar seeks hinges on righting this moral disparity and easing Makar's guilt; as a result, Makar's begging for forgiveness is paired with a promise that he will confess to the authorities for the original murder, thereby (hopefully) bringing about Aksyonov's official exoneration. In other words, the forgiveness Makar seeks rests upon an exchange—confession and apology

for the erasure of Makar's moral debts. Makar confesses to Aksyonov in unambiguous terms: "I murdered the merchant. I planted the knife on you." Moreover, to reciprocate the grant of forgiveness that Makar hopes to obtain from Aksyonov, Makar intends to share his confession with state officials so that "they'll grant you [Aksyonov] a pardon." Makar's reasoning in these lines emphasizes the tangible benefit that Aksyonov would receive as compensation for his forgiveness.

Aksyonov replies to Makar's statements with anger, as he insists that the exchange of forgiveness for confession (and probable exoneration) that Makar has proposed would not actually right the moral imbalance that exists between the two men: "It's easy enough for you to go and tell them, but just think what I'll have to endure! Where shall I go? My wife's dead, my children will have forgotten me." Aksyonov's response shows that he, too, buys into the expectation that forgiveness of one individual by another (that is, worldly, social forgiveness) requires appropriate terms of exchange for the one of whom forgiveness is requested. Aksyonov suggests that his compensation from the deal (forgiveness for confession) would be inadequate.

The sort of social, interpersonal forgiveness that is contemplated between Aksyonov and Makar—forgiveness that relies upon terms of exchange, such as the trade of forgiveness for confession and exoneration—stands in contrast to the ultimate promise of divine forgiveness and salvation offered by God to the devout. The back-and-forth between Aksyonov and Makar ends abruptly with Aksyonov's declaration, "God will forgive you." With this, Aksyonov effectively informs Makar that forgiveness is not his to give, but God's. In a sense, the moral scales are suddenly rebalanced; Makar's debt to Aksyonov vanishes momentarily as Aksyonov and Makar both appear as sinners standing before God. "Perhaps," Aksyonov tells Makar, "I'm a hundred times worse!" And "when Aksyonov heard Makar Semyonov weeping he too wept," a display of sympathy and solidarity. Ironically, Makar continues to see his situation in more conventional, worldly terms: he "ignored what Aksyonov had said and he confessed" to state officials. Tolstoy wraps up the story by rejecting this decidedly earthly, institutional confession (as opposed to religious confession or atonement) as ineffectual or irrelevant: "when official permission finally came for Aksyonov to return home he had passed away." What might be seen as the forgiveness of the state (exoneration) is unimportant; it is the judgment of God alone that matters.

Although Aksyonov ultimately declines to give Makar his forgiveness, the fact that Aksyonov is able to overcome his rage at Makar and even consider forgiving him underlines Aksyonov's Christian virtue. At one point, Aksyonov was "so furious with Makar Semyonov that he could have attacked him on the spot, and taken his revenge." Moreover, when Makar first approaches Aksyonov for forgiveness, Aksyonov is skeptical of his sincerity. Makar exclaims, "Forgive me!" and Aksyonov challenges him, "Forgive you for what?" Even after Makar elaborates, confessing to the murder, Aksyonov angrily reminds Makar that would benefit little from official exoneration, as he would have no home. However, Makar soon shifts gears in his reasoning for why Aksyonov should forgive him. Whereas before Makar tried promising Aksyonov a confession as compensation for forgiveness, Makar now gives up on this exchange and simply expresses his honest guilt over having framed Aksyonov for murder: "Forgive me! The flogging they gave me was easier to bear than looking at you now!" This pivot convinces Aksyonov of Makar's sincerity and allows Aksyonov to view Makar as a fellow sinner at God's mercy, similarly aware of his wrongs on earth. Aksyonov is moved by Makar's tears, which appear to convey a deep (and genuine) guilt.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

AKSYONOV'S GRAY HAIR

Aksyonov's graying hair emerges as a vivid symbol of his suffering, highlighting not just his aging (or the years he loses in Siberia), but his corporal decay resulting from a system of justice and punishment oriented around the body (bondage, beating, incarceration, and forced labor), rather than the soul (as in divine salvation or damnation). At the outset of the story, Aksyonov's wife foretells his suffering and persecution through a nightmare in which her husband's hair turns completely gray. Aksyonov's hair had previously been cited as a prominent physical feature and as evidence of his youthful attractiveness ("Aksyonov was very handsome, with light-brown curly hair"); thus, the decay of Aksyonov's hair amounts to a major transformation of his appearance. After Aksyonov has been wrongly arrested for murder, his wife's prophecy is quickly fulfilled; when she visits her husband in his holding cell, Aksyonov's wife runs her fingers through his hair and notes that it is already graying. That Aksyonov's hair has grayed even before he is sent to Siberia, and while he is still a relatively young man, establishes his graying hair as a direct symptom of his persecution—or his mistreatment by the corrupt state justice system. As Aksyonov's wife explains, "all your troubles have well and truly turned it [his hair] grey." Later, during Aksyonov's years in Siberia, his hair "turned as white as snow." This final step in the graying of Aksyonov's hair goes together with the culmination of his bodily deterioration, including his developing of a "stoop." Aksyonov now appears as an old man, and his fellow inmates call him "Grandpa."

AKSYONOV'S VOICE AND SINGING

Tolstoy uses Aksyonov's voice, or singing, as a symbol of his spirit. Over the course of the story, changes in Aksyonov's use of his voice call attention to the reorientation of his spirit from worldly to spiritual and to the role that persecution and suffering play in this development. In the first few lines of the story, the narrator characterizes Aksyonov as "a singer without equal," and just moments before the arrival of the police inspector and soldiers who detain Aksyonov, he "took his guitar and started playing." That Aksyonov's singing at the moment of his arrest is symbolically important is confirmed later on in the story, when Aksyonov (now in Siberia) "recalled how he had sat in the porch of the inn where he had been arrested playing the guitar. How light-hearted he had been then!" Here, singing (accompanied by the guitar, implying distinctly secular music) is a clear manifestation of Aksyonov's youthfulness and shows that Aksyonov nourishes his spirit by enjoying earthly pleasures.

Following his interrogation and wrongful imprisonment, Aksyonov's voice (and worldly light-heartedness) is taken away from him; Tolstoy repeatedly emphasizes that Aksyonov stammered before the district police inspector and that "his voice kept breaking." This marks Aksyonov's lowest point, when his spirit (or hope) has been crushed by his wrongful accusation and by the loss of his liberty. Yet during his imprisonment in Siberia, Aksyonov resurrects his beautiful voice, this time as a manifestation of his faith: "he would go to the prison chapel [...] and sing in the choir—he still had a good voice." Aksyonov now nourishes his spirit through the practice of spirituality and devotion, rather than through earthly indulgences. Tolstoy makes it clear that the carefree, worldly lifestyle of Aksyonov's youth has been annihilated by his suffering, and in its place Aksyonov has formed a new personality as a strictly devout holy man.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *Master and Man and Other Stories* published in 2005.

God Sees the Truth But Waits Quotes

"Don't worry, I'll do some good business there, make a nice little profit and then I can bring you back some expensive presents!"

Related Characters: Ivan Dmitriyevich Aksyonov (speaker), Aksyonov's Wife

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 108

Explanation and Analysis

This is Aksyonov's parting comment to his wife upon leaving the town of Vladimir and his family for the commercial Fair at Nizhny. On the way to Nizhny, Aksyonov is falsely arrested for murder, setting off a journey of persecution and hardship that will culminate in his incarceration in Siberia and his permanent dislocation from his family. Before Aksyonov makes this comment, Aksyonov's wife foresees his ordeal in a nightmare in which his hair turns completely gray; she expresses sincere concern and encourages him to stay home. This quote highlights the ease with which Aksyonov brushes off her concerns (he laughs twice before making this remark) and more generally exemplifies Aksyonov's carefree attitude and character in his youth. Aksyonov's emphasis on "profit" and "expensive presents" suggests that he is materialistic and takes his worldly prosperity for granted.

Aksyonov's comment to his wife thus marks the starting point of his spiritual journey in the story—that is, before Aksyonov's experience of hardship has led him to mature into a devout and repentant person. As the story proceeds, Aksyonov's earthly suffering and separation from his family will lead him to recognize the full value of his domestic life in Vladimir. His longing for home and family increase during his time in Siberia, posing a challenge to his determination to pivot away from worldly attachments towards a purely spiritual life as an exemplary "Man of God."

"This morning the merchant was found in bed with his throat cut. No one else but you could have done it. The hut was locked on the inside and no one else was there. And now we find this bloodstained knife in your bag. I can see you're guilty from your face. Come on, tell me how you murdered him and how much money you stole."

Related Characters: The District Police Inspector (speaker), Aksyonov's Merchant Friend, Ivan Dmitriyevich Aksyonov

Related Themes:

Page Number: 109

Explanation and Analysis

After Aksyonov's merchant friend goes missing, Aksyonov is accused of murdering his friend and is interrogated by the district police inspector. It begins with a needless repetition; the inspector has already delivered the news that Aksyonov's merchant friend, with whom Aksyonov shared tea at an inn the previous evening, has been found murdered. The inspector's repetition of this news—which lays out graphic details about the crime scene for dramatic effect—can be seen as part of a strategy of intimidating his suspect. It is also a way of projecting his power as a representative of the state, since the inspector arrives on the scene accompanied by two soldiers who represent the threat of physical force. The quote also highlights the corruption of the justice system embodied by the inspector: his inspector's claim that "no one else was there" at the inn is demonstrably false, for Tolstoy has already noted that a coach-driver and an innkeeper (not to mention the true murderer) were also present at the inn.

Thus, the inspector creates the appearance of a substantive, legitimate investigative process when he is in fact relying upon baseless reasoning, untruths, and intimidation. Having shocked Aksyonov into speechlessness, the inspector now confronts Aksyonov with an accusation of guilt that makes it sound as if Aksyonov has no way out of being convicted. With the line, "I can see you're guilty," the inspector presents himself as an unfaltering truth-seer and reminds Aksyonov of his power as a state official (or of the power imbalance of state authority over subject). The inspector reinforces the impression that Aksyonov has no real chance of appeal by following his accusation right away with a demand that Aksyonov confess; instead of asking *whether* Aksyonov murdered the merchant, he asks "how you murdered him." This interaction encapsulates Tolstoy's critique of the criminal justice system, as the inspector purports to be upholding the law but is clearly power-hungry and biased against the possibly of Aksyonov's innocence.

"Obviously, no one except God can know the truth… only from Him should I ask help, from Him alone can I expect mercy."

Related Characters: Ivan Dmitriyevich Aksyonov (speaker), Aksyonov's Wife

Related Themes:

Page Number: 111

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is a thought, rather than a statement, by Aksyonov. It represents a moment of realization following a shocking meeting with his wife in the local jailhouse, before Aksyonov is removed to Siberia. Here, she informs him that the Tsar has rejected his last appeal and expresses suspicion that he may actually be guilty of murder. This meeting marks the final time that Aksyonov sees his wife and children, and Aksyonov's permanent separation from his family is accompanied by his pivot—captured in these lines—from a life of worldliness and materialism towards intent to live a strictly spiritual life. The clarity with which this moral lesson is presented fits with the genre of the story; "God Sees the Truth But Waits" is a parable, or fable, meant to provide moral instruction to readers (especially children) in readily-understandable terms. What stands out in this quote (as, indeed, in the very title of the story) is Tolstoy's emphasis on truth as the basis for divine mercy; the argument is that since only God sees the full truth, real justice can be found only in a spiritual, rather than an earthly, context.

"To pay for my sins I've done twenty-six years penal servitude."

Related Characters: Ivan Dmitriyevich Aksyonov (speaker), Makar Semyonov

Related Themes:

Page Number: 112

Explanation and Analysis

This line is spoken by Aksyonov to his fellow prisoner Makar Semyonov, in response to Makar asking him why he was incarcerated. Even though Aksyonov is innocent of the crime of murder for which he was imprisoned, here he recognizes that his punishment has a legitimate spiritual purpose—that is, he sees his ordeal of earthly suffering at the hands of the corrupt state justice system as a proportionate penalty for the wrongs of his youth and as an opportunity to atone for his sins. This shows Aksyonov's conviction to pivot towards a spiritual life and to concentrate on God's judgment after earthly justice has failed him. Aksyonov's determination to adopt a spiritual perspective, and to see all worldly things as part of an overarching divine order, represents a sharp departure from the attitude Aksyonov showed during his youth in Vladimir, when he drank excessively and pursued a

materialistic life as a merchant.

Moreover, Aksyonov's comment fits with the Christian motif of suffering that occurs throughout narratives about saints; it is often by undergoing earthly ordeals of persecution and pain that exemplary holy figures (such as Aksyonov, who comes to be known by fellow prisoners as "Man of God") develop and prove their complete devotion to and trust in God. Aksyonov's remark to Makar stands in stark contrast to Makar's own comments to fellow inmates shortly beforehand, in which he tries unconvincingly to persuade his audience that he has been "sent here [to Siberia] for nothing at all."

> "It's obvious the murderer was the one in whose bag the knife was found. If someone planted a knife on you he hasn't been caught—no man is a thief until he's caught! And how could anyone have slipped a knife into your bag? He'd have had to be standing right at the head of your bed—and then you'd have heard him."

Related Characters: Makar Semyonov (speaker), Ivan Dmitriyevich Aksyonov

Related Themes:

Page Number: 113

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is part of Aksyonov's first conversation with Makar Semyonov, a new inmate at the Siberian prison. Aksyonov has learned that Makar, like him, comes from the town of Vladimir. This remark by Makar leads Aksyonov to suspect that it was Makar who set him up for the murder of his merchant friend over two decades ago. Tolstoy makes it clear that Makar, before delivering this quote, has already recognized Aksyonov as the man he framed. Thus, this comment amounts to a cruel sort of toying with Aksyonov by Makar; Makar drops taunting hints that it was he who committed the crime and shows absolutely no sense of remorse for Aksyonov's intense, long-term suffering as a result of his actions.

In the last two lines of this excerpt, in which Makar asks Aksyonov how someone could possibly have gotten close enough to plant the bloody knife on him, Makar seems to be mocking Aksyonov; he implies that Aksyonov must have been careless to let the true criminal get close enough to set him up for the killing. Makar is displacing some of his own responsibility by suggesting that Aksyonov was guilty of negligence, or allowed himself to be taken advantage of. Additionally, Makar's comment that "no man is a thief until he's caught" represents a direct negation of the moral of the story: that God always sees the truth and eventually restores justice in the afterlife. Makar implies that the only thing that matters for one's guilt or innocence is whether he or she has been caught by the state authorities (or his or her status vis-à-vis the criminal justice system). In sum, this quote highlights Makar's potential for cruelty, and thus sets up his dramatic transformation before the end of the story, when he suddenly develops a strong, genuine sense of remorse, begs Aksyonov's forgiveness, and confesses to the authorities that it was he who murdered Aksyonov's merchant friend.

> "I *could* cover up for him, but why should I forgive the man who ruined me? [...] Let him pay the price for all my suffering. On the other hand, they're bound to flog him if I testify against him. And what if my suspicions are wrong? Would it make me feel any easier?"
>
> [...]
>
> "I saw nothing and I know nothing."

Related Characters: Ivan Dmitriyevich Aksyonov (speaker), The Governor, Makar Semyonov

Related Themes:

Page Number: 115

Explanation and Analysis

Only the final line of this quote ("I saw nothing and I know nothing," Aksyonov's false reply to the Governor when the Governor asks him who dug a prison escape route) is spoken out loud; what precedes it is Aksyonov's thought process and deliberations as to whether he should inform on his fellow inmate, Makar Semyonov, whom he discovered digging the tunnel the previous night. Aksyonov's ultimate decision to lie to the Governor and protect Makar, notably, does not amount to forgiveness of Makar; rather, Aksyonov's two reasons seem to be, first, that he does not wish to see Makar flogged (the same punishment Aksyonov received) and, second, that there is a chance his suspicions of Makar are misplaced. The quote thus shows Aksyonov's rejection of the institutional justice system and of the Governor's authority. Not only does Aksyonov distrust the state to establish the facts of guilt and innocence, but he believes that even the guilty do not deserve the corporal

punishments (in this case, flogging) that stand at the center of the judicial system. Aksyonov has reached a point where he respects only God's authority, or divine judgment.

This quote also emphasizes Aksyonov's anger towards Makar: Aksyonov reminds himself in strong terms that Makar "ruined me" and rather callously imagines deriving some gratification from Makar's having to pay for "all" of his suffering over the past 26 years. This shows that Aksyonov's spiritual focus and path towards salvation is not without its setbacks; Aksyonov occasionally lapses into rage and depression, even contemplating the horrific Christian sin of suicide at one point, when he first begins to suspect that it was Makar who framed him.

"Ivan Dmitriyevich, forgive me. For God's sake forgive me! I'll confess to the murder and they'll grant you a pardon. Then you'll be able to go home."

Related Characters: Makar Semyonov (speaker), Ivan Dmitriyevich Aksyonov

Related Themes:

Page Number: 115

Explanation and Analysis

After Aksyonov protects Makar from the state authorities, refusing to tell the Governor that it was Makar who dug an escape tunnel, Makar comes to Aksyonov in private begging his forgiveness and admitting to having framed Aksyonov for the murder of his merchant friend 26 years ago (the crime for which Aksyonov was imprisoned). This represents a sharp change of course from Makar's earlier insensitive mockery of Aksyonov; Makar previously toyed with Aksyonov by hinting that it was he who murdered the merchant and cruelly asking Aksyonov how he could have allowed himself to be set up. However, by the time he delivers this quote, Makar has still not reached the end-point of his spiritual about-face, when Aksyonov senses Makar's genuine regret, cries in sympathy for Makar's suffering, and assures Makar that God will forgive him. Here, Makar invokes God, but he continues to buy into the earthly, social system of justice by assuming that Aksyonov wants an official pardon as a sort of payoff for his forgiveness. This assumption highlights the ongoing contrast between society's misguided ideas of justice, and the ultimate judgment of God—whereas Makar believes that the former determines a person's guilt, this quote foreshadows the fact that only the latter is capable of imbuing an individual with lasting forgiveness.

"It's easy enough for you to go and tell them, but just think what *I'll* have to endure! Where shall I go? My wife's dead, my children will have forgotten me. I've *nowhere* to go…"

Related Characters: Ivan Dmitriyevich Aksyonov (speaker), Makar Semyonov

Related Themes:

Page Number: 115

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is Aksyonov's response to Makar, after Makar offers to confess to the authorities that he set Aksyonov up for murder 26 years ago. Makar offers the confession as compensation for Aksyonov's forgiveness, which Makar is desperate to receive. Aksyonov replies angrily that the terms of this exchange would be inappropriate, as Aksyonov's release from prison would actually expose him to the psychological pain of having permanently lost his home and family. This quote represents a moment of regression in Aksyonov's turn towards a purely spiritual outlook, showing that Aksyonov's journey towards becoming an ideal, model "Man of God" is far from straightforward or linear. While in prison, Aksyonov is repeatedly struck by thoughts of the worldly attachments he has lost—particularly his family and his home.

Indeed, Aksyonov's wife and children come to symbolize earthly concerns that pull him back from thoughts solely about the afterlife. Aksyonov is tempted to reject the moral of the story (that God will restore true justice) by the thought that he can never get his family or old life restored to him. Ultimately, however, Aksyonov overcomes these earthly connections, as well as his rage towards Makar: after Makar shows a genuine pain and sorrow over having wronged Aksyonov decades ago, Aksyonov assures Makar that God will forgive him and, by affirming the guarantee of God's justice, liberates himself from agonizing thoughts about all the things that he has lost. At the end of the story Tolstoy expressly states that Aksyonov passes away no longer thinking of his home, but only of his final moments—that is, his passage into the Christian afterlife.

"Ivan Dmitriyevich! Forgive me! [...] The flogging they gave me was easier to bear than looking at you now! When I think how you took pity on me and didn't inform. Oh, forgive me for Christ's sake! Forgive me—I'm such a rotten bastard!"

Related Characters: Makar Semyonov (speaker), Ivan Dmitriyevich Aksyonov

Related Themes:

Page Number: 116

Explanation and Analysis

This quote contains Makar Semyonov's third repetition of his plea for Aksyonov's forgiveness during Makar and Aksyonov's dramatic encounter in Siberia near the end of the story. Makar, who framed Aksyonov for murder 26 years earlier, is moved by Aksyonov's decision to protect him from an investigation by the Governor and feels overwhelmed by the imbalance of the harm he has done to Aksyonov versus the good Aksyonov has done to him. Though Makar here repeats his appeal for forgiveness, this appeal departs in significant ways from the one before it; whereas Makar previously tried to obtain Aksyonov's forgiveness through a kind of quid pro quo by which he would confess to the authorities and guarantee Aksyonov's exoneration, Makar now conveys a more genuine grief and agony that triggers in Aksyonov a sense of sympathy and solidarity. While Makar's previous request for forgiveness (in exchange for confession) ignited Aksyonov's rage (Aksyonov angrily responded that even if he were released from jail he would have no home or family to return to), this request brings Aksyonov to tears and leads Aksyonov to shift from seeing Makar as an adversary to seeing him as a fellow sinner before God. This change of perspective culminates in a striking final promise by Aksyonov to Makar that God will forgive Makar, as well as a comment by Aksyonov that he may be a worse sinner than Makar, suggesting that they are both in the same situation, and that divine judgment is the only means by which they can atone for their sins.

"God will forgive you. [...] Perhaps I'm a hundred times worse."

Related Characters: Ivan Dmitriyevich Aksyonov (speaker), Makar Semyonov

Related Themes:

Page Number: 116

Explanation and Analysis

This is the final quote spoken by the protagonist Aksyonov in the story. It marks the resolution of a long scene between Aksyonov and Makar Semyonov, a fellow inmate who framed him for murder 26 years ago, during which Makar continually begs Aksyonov for forgiveness. Though Aksyonov here withholds forgiveness from Makar, he reveals the overarching lesson of the story, a fable composed to instruct children in faith and morality—that one should turn away from the purported justice that comes from the state and from worldly authorities and place complete trust in God's judgment, or restoration of moral order in the afterlife. Although this quote is short, its impact is immense; it represents Aksyonov's final jettisoning of worldly concerns and brings to Aksyonov a feeling of complete spiritual and psychological comfort.

This final acknowledgment that genuine justice and forgiveness are in God's hands alone, not any human's, brings an end to Aksyonov's inner turmoil throughout the story. Additionally, Aksyonov's comment to Makar that "perhaps I'm a hundred times worse" marks Aksyonov's renewing of his spiritual mission (to use his ordeal as an opportunity to atone for his own sins) and reveals that Aksyonov is moved to feel a sense of solidarity with Makar, recognizing them both as equals—two sinners standing in fear of God's judgment. Aksyonov's rejection of worldly justice and insistence on the primacy of faith is confirmed by the last sentences of the story, in which Tolstoy states that Aksyonov dies before official permission for his release (a result of Makar's confession to the authorities) arrives. This long-overdue correction by the criminal justice system has no effect—Aksyonov has already passed into God's domain.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

GOD SEES THE TRUTH BUT WAITS

Aksyonov, a well-to-do young merchant from the town of Vladimir, prepares to set off for the commercial Fair at Nizhny. Aksyonov's wife urges him to say home, saying that she has had a bad dream in which his **hair** turned completely gray. Aksyonov assumes that she is worried he will drink too much (as he has a habit of binge drinking) and dismisses her concerns. He promises that he will "do some good business" at Nizhny and bring her back "expensive presents."

The young Aksyonov's drinking and materialism (for example, his pursuit of business profits and "expensive presents") establish him as a casually sinful person who has yet to recognize the primacy of faith and devotion. Additionally, the ease with which Aksyonov dismisses his wife's concerns shows that he takes his family, home, and as perhaps his other social connections somewhat for granted.

Halfway to Nizhny, Aksyonov meets a merchant friend at an inn, where they have tea and spend the night in adjoining rooms. After leaving the inn and continuing his journey to Nizhny, Aksyonov takes a break to rest, eat, and play his guitar. Suddenly, a district police inspector arrives with two soldiers, interrogates Aksyonov as to his whereabouts and actions the previous evening, and then announces that Aksyonov's merchant friend has been found murdered at the inn.

The district police inspector appears on the scene as an immediately intimidating figure, for he is accompanied by two soldiers who represent the threat of force. Known only by his title, the inspector symbolizes the impersonal, overbearing state power that underlies the criminal justice system.

The police inspector orders a search of Aksyonov's belongings and discovers a bloody knife. The inspector formally accuses Aksyonov of murder, and a terrified Aksyonov stammers and quakes with fear. Aksyonov is physically restrained and sent to jail.

The inspector's accusation and arrest of Aksyonov illustrate the corruption of institutional justice. The inspector rapidly leverages state authority (and physical force) against Aksyonov without irrefutable evidence that he is the murderer, and Aksyonov is so overwhelmed that he is rendered unable to defend himself.

Aksyonov's wife comes to visit him in jail. She collapses upon seeing her husband in prison clothes and fetters. After regaining her senses, she informs Aksyonov that the last of his appeals—a petition to the Tsar—has been rejected, and she then shocks Aksyonov by asking whether he actually committed the murder for which he was arrested. As a soldier separates Aksyonov from his wife and children for the last time, Aksyonov reflects upon his wife's suspicion of his guilt and concludes that he can rely on God alone to know the truth and to offer mercy.

The failure of Aksyonov's final appeal to the Tsar, along with his wife's suspicion of his guilt, leads him to recognize God as the only entity who can be trusted to see the truth and deliver real justice. Aksyonov realizes that he must pivot towards seeking God's forgiveness by living a more spiritual life, and this change in focus is reinforced by Aksyonov's final physical separation from his family—his strongest earthly attachment.

Aksyonov is flogged and then sent to a Siberian labor camp. He remains here for 26 years, developing a stoop and losing his youthful gaiety. While incarcerated, Aksyonov becomes devoutly religious. He prays frequently, reads religious literature, and **sings** in the church choir. Aksyonov's fellow inmates refer to him as "Grandpa" and "Man of God."

Aksyonov's flogging and the breakdown of his body (for instance, his development of a stoop) during his incarceration highlight the focus of institutional justice on bodily punishment. Along with highlighting the brutality of the criminal justice system, this contrasts with God's judgment of the soul. Through his religious activities in prison, Aksyonov transforms into an ideal holy man, or a model for readers' emulation. Like many Christian saints, Aksyonov responds to his earthly persecution and suffering by strengthening his faith, or by trusting that real justice comes from God, and not from any source on Earth.

During Aksyonov's 26th year at the Siberian prison, a new group of convicts arrives. One of them, Makar Semyonov, has been imprisoned for allegedly stealing a horse from a sledge. He says he comes from Vladimir, and Aksyonov asks for news of his family. Makar says that he has heard of Aksyonov's family as prosperous merchants whose husband (or father) is locked up in Siberia. Makar asks Aksyonov why he was imprisoned, but Aksyonov will say only that his 26 years of penal servitude have been payment for his sins.

Aksyonov's instinctual questioning of Makar about his wife and children shows the power of family as a source of earthly attachment that keeps Aksyonov's thoughts on the world, rather than on God. At the same time, however, Aksyonov's insistence that he is paying for his sins enhances his image as a model "Man of God." Aksyonov treats his earthly suffering as inspiration to atone for his spiritual transgressions (or to seek God's forgiveness) and as a test through which he can prove himself worthy of salvation.

Other inmates tell Makar about the merchant's murder and Aksyonov's wrongful arrest. Makar's reaction to this information leads Aksyonov to suspect that it was Makar who framed him for murder. Aksyonov is overwhelmed with anger at Makar, and he thinks longingly of his family. Aksyonov becomes so depressed that he considers either attacking Makar or committing suicide.

The anger Aksyonov feels towards Makar indicates that Aksyonov's path towards becoming an ideal "Man of God" is not without its setbacks and its trials: the actions Aksyonov contemplates—suicide or a violent assault on the man who framed him—would both amount to a terrible regression into sin. Additionally, that Aksyonov's thoughts rush to his family shows that even despite Aksyonov's intense devotional activities in Siberia, he has a hard time letting go of his most powerful worldly or societal attachments—attachments that might jeopardize his fulfillment of a purely spiritual life.

One night, Aksyonov discovers Makar digging an escape tunnel. The next day, the authorities discover the hole, and the Governor arrives on the scene to question the prisoners as to who was trying to escape. Reasoning that he does not wish to see Makar flogged (and that his suspicion of Makar for the merchant's murder may be misplaced), Aksyonov tells the Governor that he knows nothing about who dug the tunnel.

Like the district police inspector who accused Aksyonov of murder, the Governor is a state official known only by his title; he serves as a symbol of institutional justice. Aksyonov's desire to spare Makar from flogging—and his decision to blatantly lie to the Governor—represent a rejection of the state justice system that the Governor represents. Importantly, forgiveness of Makar does not factor into Aksyonov's reasoning; Aksyonov's actions are principally a rejection of the Governor's authority.

The following night, Aksyonov finds Makar sitting at the foot of his bunk. Makar, overwhelmed by Aksyonov's goodness in protecting him from the Governor, confesses to having framed Aksyonov for murder 26 years earlier and begs his forgiveness. Makar offers to admit his guilt to the authorities and thereby exonerate Aksyonov.

Makar seeks Aksyonov's forgiveness as a way of easing the burden (or moral imbalance) he feels for having done harm to a man who has done good to him. Moreover, Makar hopes to acquire Aksyonov's forgiveness as part of a negotiated exchange; if Aksyonov will forgive him, Makar promises, he will exonerate Aksyonov by sharing his confession with the authorities. This suggests that true forgiveness for one's sins is more fulfilling and meaningful than falsely asserting one's innocence.

Aksyonov responds to Makar's confession with indignation, claiming that even if Makar were to help him secure his release from prison, he would have no home or family to which he could return. However, Makar continues to seek Aksyonov's forgiveness and breaks down sobbing. Aksyonov is moved by Makar's genuine guilt and pain, and he too breaks down in tears.

Aksyonov imagines that the social life—life outside prison—would not be worthwhile if he did not have his family. The extent to which he values his family during his imprisonment contrasts with his attitude at the beginning of the story, when he seemed to take his wife somewhat for granted. Aksyonov continues to withhold forgiveness from Makar, as he judges the terms of exchange Makar offered him—confession and exoneration in return for forgiveness—to be inadequate. Aksyonov does, however, cry in sympathy with Makar, a reaction that portrays him as somewhat of a forgiving, Christlike figure. Aksyonov begins to feel solidarity with his fellow prisoner as he recognizes their shared pain and common situation as sinners desperate for forgiveness. (Aksyonov, of course, is seeking the forgiveness of God).

Aksyonov tells Makar that God will forgive him. Aksyonov feels a weight off his shoulders and no longer "pines" for his freedom or for his family. Instead, Aksyonov thinks only of his "last hour."

Aksyonov finally orients himself fully towards God and the afterlife. He does so in two key steps. First, he recognizes that only God can forgive, thus easing the burden of anger that he previously felt towards Makar and relieving his uncertain thoughts over justice on Earth (for example, his deliberations as to whether Makar deserves his forgiveness). Second, Aksyonov at last jettisons all earthly attachments, including his aspiration for freedom in the outside world (beyond the walls of the prison) and his fixation on his family—his strongest social bond.

Makar confesses to the authorities that it was he who murdered the merchant, not Aksyonov, and Aksyonov is officially exonerated. However, by the time permission arrives for him to be released from the labor camp Aksyonov has passed away.

Makar, unlike Aksyonov, continues to buy into the legitimacy of institutional justice (rather than waiting for true justice from God) and confesses to the authorities that he set Aksyonov up for murder. Aksyonov's resulting exoneration—an attempt at official justice by the state—proves utterly meaningless as Aksyonov has already died. All that matters after Aksyonov's passing is God's judgment; Tolstoy uses the final lines of the story to emphasize the total superiority of divine judgment to corrupt earthly attempts at justice. Aksyonov finally achieves his status as a true spiritual icon, or "Man of God," by passing away, having shed all of his worldly concerns (including thoughts of family and freedom) and given full attention to the fate of his soul.

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