

# Understatement in one day in the life of ivan denisovich



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Harsh climatic conditions, no food and hard work; all of these aspects symbolize the daily life of a prisoner inside the Gulag. The horrifying treatment of the prisoners is very well documented in many prison novels. However, the way that the conditions are described can vary from novel to novel, depending upon the author's purpose. Some authors prefer to exaggerate the horrors faced by the prisoners to spark outrage from the reader, while others prefer to depict the horrors in a more subtle way to achieve a similar objective. Alexander Solzhenitsyn evokes emotions through the use of understatement. In *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, Solzhenitsyn utilizes the literary technique of understatement to highlight the extent to which dehumanization is present in the Gulag. From the beginning of the novel until the very end, the physical setting of the Gulag and its harsh climatic implications are understated. The first description of the weather appears when the prisoners can barely hear the morning reveille as it couldn't "penetrate the windowpanes on which the frost lay two fingers thick." The frost on the windowpanes represents the true cold the zeks face daily. The author's casual mention of the frost being two fingers thick, could be a symbolic representation of how the prisoners in the Gulag are accustomed to this kind of weather. The full extent of the cold could be felt when Shukhov goes to the steppe, where "bare white snow stretched to the horizon, to the left, to the right, and not a single tree could be seen on the whole expanse of the steppe." (pg. 39) The barren land indicates the desolate and inescapable environment in which the zeks live. The understatement present in this example indicates the harsh reality of the situation. Due to the harsh climatic conditions, the prisoners need a form of distraction to survive, which comes in the form of work. In fact, "most

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depend on the work report than on the work itself," as it gives the zeks extra food (pg. 59) . The importance of the work is understated in this section, because the six ounces of bread that the prisoners receive would not be considered substantial outside the gulag, yet it still holds significance for the prisoners. However, to them, the extra ounces could mean their survival. The amount of work accomplished by the prisoners for the insignificant amount of food depicts the dehumanization present in the novel. While the amount of food may be less than normal, it is the force that drives the prisoners to accomplish more. For example, when the prisoners receive one bowl of soup, they regard it as, " dearer than freedom, dearer than life itself, past, present, and future" (126). This highlights the number of atrocities that the prisoners go through, as the narrator compares food, including the deprivation of food, to that of freedom. It gives them a reason to work, something to fight for, and the ability to survive. This use of understatement creates the sense that a measly bowl of soup becomes the only thing that matters in the eyes of the Zeks. This extent to which the prisoners have been dehumanized brings them to the point that little can mean so much in relation to their survival. Many of the men in the Gulag are innocent of committing any real crimes, yet the Gulag dehumanizes them to the point that the innocent cannot be distinguished from the guilty. Men who already struggle to understand why they are in the Gulag, must adapt to being treated the same way that even a real criminal would find inhumane. Buinovsky criticises the guards by saying that they are " not behaving like Soviet people..... not behaving like communists" (pg 34). To Buinovksy, the prison guards are going against the Communist code, and mistreating the prisoners completely through their absurd rules and regulations. His criticism of the prison guards as " bad" <https://assignbuster.com/understatement-in-one-day-in-the-life-of-ivan-denisovich/>

communists creates understatement as well as a sense of irony. Buinovsky expresses the way communists ought to behave, even though communists sentence him to the Gulag in the first place. To criticise the guards as bad communists is an understatement as they should really be criticised for a lack of moral code and for being unjust. When describing the experience that one of the members of Shukhov's squad faces, Solzhenitsyn simply states that " he was captured; he escaped, and then he was recaptured,"(pg 49). The zeks are dehumanized even though many of them do not belong in the Gulag since they have been arrested for trivial reasons. Solzhenitsyn attempts to understate the dehumanization present by dismissing the capture as if it was not important, and showcases it almost as if it was a consistent occurrence. The innocent men that are trapped in the Gulag are there due to no fault of their own, making it seem as though constant fear of imprisonment is a norm in this society. The ending of the novel gives the reader an idea of the true value of understatement in the novel. After the day goes by, and Shukhov reminisces over what has happened during the one day, he realizes that " today was almost a happy day."(pg. 167) This statement has a lasting effect on the way the novel can be interpreted, because the day starts off poorly when Shukhov is punished for staying in bed, resulting in him moping the guardhouse floors, then he and his squad go to a site to work in the fierce cold. At this point, the single day would seem like anything but a good day; as a result of the use of understatement to emphasize the hardships the zeks face. However, Solzhenitsyn's final use of understatement has the same effect on a larger scale. It exhibits the notion that these prisoners have experienced such constant hardships and injustices, that a day in which they survive can be considered good, Shukhov

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manages to do his work well, which gives him a sense of dignity in a society where most individual characteristics are stripped, and he also feels more spiritually connected after his conversation with Alyoshka. This also interplays with the role of time in the novel, which is understated as Shukhov finishes by stating how many days remain in his sentence. He makes this statement so bluntly, that it sounds bearable, yet in reality it is nearly impossible to survive considering that a 'good' day is one in which he receives a slight amount of additional food. Shukhov's sense of time is almost distorted from reality, due to the inhumane conditions he has been living for years. Work seems to be the leading factor to determine the way the day has shaped his reaction. It is the effect of work that causes the day to pass by so quickly. The understated and ambiguous ending, enhances the irony and understatement of the situation. After waking up sick, Shukhov is punished for not getting out of bed on time, and was treated poorly.

Combine those situations with the constant hard work and harsh climatic conditions, and this evokes a feeling of the terrible day that Shukhov is experiencing. However, Shukhov's insistence that this was a good day evokes the speculation of what a bad day would be like. His mistreatment at the hands of the Gulag prison guards depicts an image of a suffering man, who has no method of escape. However, the word "almost" changes the definition of the statement. Shukhov's "almost" could vary from horrid to acceptable, a notable difference. Solzhenitsyn's use of "almost" leaves the interpretation to the reader's mind regarding whether the mood ends on an optimistic or pessimistic note. The use of understatement contributes to the sub-text of this novel as it deals with the subtle dehumanization of the zeks.

Solzhenitsyn attempts to combine and enhance all of the harsh effects of the <https://assignbuster.com/understatement-in-one-day-in-the-life-of-ivan-denisovich/>

Gulag through his use of understatement. Understatement is a technique that Solzhenitsyn uses to imply how commonplace the mistreatment and utter brutality the men face becomes during Stalin's reign. It evokes shock as the reader feels completely appalled by the subhuman living conditions and treatment, of prisoners which the narrator expresses as "normal." This highlights how much the prisoners were mistreated on a regular basis, and that a simple day in which a prisoner receives a few extra rations and avoids punishment could be considered a good one. As a result, the role of understatement in the novel, *One day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* provides the reader with a clear and concise image of what the prisoners truly suffered.