

An analysis of ivan's
role as an existential
character in
alexander
solzhenitsyn' ...



**ASSIGN
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In his novel *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, Alexander Solzhenitsyn illustrates the struggle for survival zeks faced within the GULAG. He elucidates this effectively through the portrayal of a day's experiences in the life of Ivan Denisovich Shukhov, a working-class prisoner in a Stalinist labor camp. Having had first-hand experiences with this communist regime himself, Solzhenitsyn establishes Ivan and his routine to typify that of an ordinary citizen within the Russian society; just as he once was too. He vividly presents Ivan's character through the use of various techniques in order to portray Ivan's existential approach to his imprisonment and survival within a brutal system of injustice. In *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, Solzhenitsyn develops Ivan as an existential character to juxtapose and contrast the gruelling environment propagated by the GULAG authority through the exemplification of Ivan's behavioral code, and his seamless transition into the absurd setting of the GULAG, in turn producing symbols which serve to compliment Ivan's existential characteristics.

Solzhenitsyn expands on Ivan's existential nature through one of Ivan's most significant traits; the behavioral code by which he lives. Existential notions, according to the philosopher Sartre, frequently emphasize the idea of choice; "Individuals are condemned, because they are free, to choose what they are going to be through their daily actions". In other words, in order to distinguish himself, Ivan must remain in control of his own actions by choosing to act rather than simply following instructions. Solzhenitsyn emphasizes this through the depiction of the code of living that Ivan upholds entirely on his own. From the beginning of the novel in which reveille has been called, Solzhenitsyn suggests that the aspect of choice not only defines

the day, but allows Ivan to maintain his self worth in spite of the strict disciplines of the camp. For instance, Solzhenitsyn reveals that “[Ivan] never overslept reveille... for the next ninety minutes... belonged to him, not the authorities..”. In addition, Ivan always remembered the words of his first squad leader, who told him that self-sufficiency was key to survival –words that Ivan utilizes to maintain his individuality. Through this, Solzhenitsyn exemplifies Ivan's insistence on retaining his freedom of choice through his refusal to devote his time to the authorities. Ivan's attitude towards food and the way in which he chooses to eat is directly related to this as well, for Ivan firmly believes in his own strict approach towards how food should be properly viewed and consumed within the camp; “ you had to eat with all your mind on the food” (Solzhenitsyn 43), because when “[it is] gulped down [it] is... wasted” (Solzhenitsyn 25). The camp authorities are determined to strip the prisoners of their humanity by tampering with one of the most basic human needs – food. However, Ivan's ability to differentiate when and how he eats puts him –instead of the prison guards– in command of his own actions, and therefore his choices maintain his existentialism.

Despite Ivan's ability to conduct himself with dignity through his code, the GULAG remains a setting of chaos and absurdity, deepening the link between Ivan and existentialism. The idea of absurdism in the existential world is present when “ the world is not thus explicable, but it exists without apparent justification, foundation or purpose” (“ What Is Existentialism?”). Ivan readily accepts his condemnation and seamlessly takes on the role of a prisoner, despite existing in a world “ without apparent justification”. A world where men frequently freeze to death and die of starvation. The GULAG itself

is founded upon absurdity, a camp in which most of its prisoners are innocent men who die condemned; a place where even bribery is dismissed as something of habitude and corruption is the basis on which the whole regime is built. However, Ivan does not spend his time pondering the reason behind his reality, because after all, it was he himself who pleaded guilty in the first place. Instead, he accepts the consequences of it because it is his reality, which is another quality of an existentialist; “ [he] realised what [his] situation is, and who [has], within that situation, chosen to engage [himself] responsibly in the world around [him] so as to affirm [his] liberty” (“ What Is Existentialism?”). Ivan conducts himself in a way that is necessary despite his circumstances, and in some ways the understatement of his chaotic environment only emphasizes the chaos which is present. Solzhenitsyn further utilizes specific literary devices to demonstrate Ivan's approach to living within the GULAG, namely symbolic objects, which are produced through his establishment of the absurd. Existential philosophy suggests one of its defining characteristics to be an emphasis on personal freedom, and as adapted from Sartre, “ To be free is to recognise one's complete independence; to make one's own life through one's own initiative” (“ What Is Existentialism?”). Ivan's handcrafted spoon, of which he is tremendously proud and even refers to as “ his little baby”, is Ivan's way of retaining his “ own initiative,” allowing him to separate himself from the absurd behavior in which the environment of the GULAG promotes (Solzhenitsyn 84). This gives him independence, which in turn makes him stand out among the majority of the prisoners. The spoon itself becomes a medium in which Ivan can freely express himself as an individual of his own free will, further isolating himself

from the GULAG and allowing him not only to focus on survival, but to survive with decency.

In a way, Ivan himself becomes a symbol, namely one of independence. This ties into the existential philosophy of alienation as adapted from Kierkegaard, in which “ the task of the self is the overcoming of alienation through self-becoming” (“ What Is Existentialism?”). This concept is present within the GULAG where “ a zek's worst enemy is another zek”, further emphasizing the true isolation Ivan experiences, even from his fellow prisoners (Solzhenitsyn 90). However, Ivan's ability to overcome this alienation through his focus on his own existence is what not only further defines him as an agent of existentialism, but what enables him to ultimately overcome other zeks, and, more importantly, the GULAG authority. While simultaneously opposing Soviet ideology, these concepts mirror existential philosophies. Solzhenitsyn uses this philosophy to oppose Stalin's regime, where unity branded as conformity, as opposed to independence, is expected. He does so by revealing the control and empowerment Ivan creates through his own free will in spite of the pressures and constant commands from the system to do the opposite. Thus, through the use of symbolism specific to Ivan, Solzhenitsyn establishes Ivan as an existential agent as a means of contrasting the GULAG power. At the end of the novel, Ivan reflects on his day by calling it “ almost a happy day” because “ he hadn't fallen ill” or been imprisoned (Solzhenitsyn 139). This mirrors the existential quality of facticity as addressed by Sartre and de Beauvoir. These notions suggest that one's reality is fixed and unchangeable, however, this cannot necessarily define the individual, meaning that one's facticity does

not limit his or her free will ("What Is Existentialism?"). Furthermore, Ivan's individual-focused mindset is elucidated in the following scene in which Ivan "now... complained about nothing: neither about the length of his stretch, nor about the length of the day, nor about their swiping another Sunday. This was all he thought about now: we'll survive. We'll stick it out, God willing, till it's over" (Solzhenitsyn 77). In this way, Ivan does not work or live to please anyone but himself, and especially not the leaders of the GULAG. This ties in again with the existential quality of the absurd as explained by Sartre, a notion that suggests there is no purpose to life beyond that which an individual gives it ("What Is Existentialism?"). In that, Solzhenitsyn's establishment of Ivan as an existentialist is a testament to the philosophy that anyone can find meaning or purpose in life, regardless of their circumstances.

Solzhenitsyn's establishment of Ivan as an existential figure contrasts the GULAG authority to illustrate the negative aspects of the Stalinist era. Solzhenitsyn's inclusion of Ivan's code, the seamless transition Ivan makes into the absurdity of the GULAG, and his purposeful use of symbolism explore the role that existential values play within oppressive and adverse circumstances. Solzhenitsyn's use of existentialism within the novel serves to ultimately enrich the theme of how humans deal with times of struggle and provide a deeper comprehension of the historical context in which the novel was first published. Solzhenitsyn suggests that an existential perspective may be key to survival within the GULAG. Furthermore, this ideology, when examined in regards to Solzhenitsyn's intention of establishing the GULAG as a microcosm for the Soviet Union at the time,

which focused on the creation of a perfect collective, indicates not only the way of thinking he considers to best oppose the regime, but also brings to light in the broader sense, the struggle humans experience on their quest for finding purpose and meaning in life. In other words, individuality.

Solzhenitsyn applies this idea to the historical context of the novel, resulting in an emphasis on the contrast between the intentions of the Soviet regime: collectivism, and what they actually teach: strength in individuality.