Symbols In One Day In The Life Of Ivan Denisovich

The Russian novella One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich by Alexander Solzhenitsyn uses physical objects such as the spoon, bread, hat, and parcels, to represent Shukhov's inner struggle to survive his circumstances. Hidden throughout the book are symbols used to convey the deeper meaning of the work to the audience. Through the use of symbolic physical objects, Solzhenitsyn expresses the oppressive nature of the bitter Siberian gulags and the effect of the environment on the souls and spirits of the prisoners.

One of the symbols is one Shukhov's most prized possessions: a crude, metal spoon "He'd cast himself from aluminum wire" and engraved with the words 'Ust-Izhma 1944" (89). Ivan carries this metal spoon in his boot at all times and uses it to eat the meager meals in the Siberian gulag. Because of the communal nature of the prison camp, Shukhov is accustomed to sharing everything with the other Zeks, but his spoon stands as his singular possession which he can call his own. The uniqueness of this spoon is distinctive to Shukhov, it is the little bit of personal property that he has control over and is able to manipulate. The ability to use the spoon allows Shukhov to act more individually than his surrounding comrades and gives him a sense of self in the never-ending daily life of the prison camp. The struggle for humanity is consistently illustrated throughout the book but is especially expressed when Shukhov hides his spoon in his boot after every meal. As Shukhov continuously repeats this habit, he pushes away his identity to conform with the rest of the prisoners. The spoon represents Shukhov's individuality which he constantly attempts to sustain while keeping it hidden from those who might try and take it away. Ivan always made sure that "he hadn't forgotten his spoon" whenever he went anywhere and kept it in a safe location at all times. Shukhov's methodology to survival without the help of an officer or squad member relies on the dignity and individualism which his aluminum spoon provides him. The spoon and Shukhov are never to be intentionally separated in the unjust system created to strip prisoners of identity and forced into labor, providing both a physical and mental possession that can only be called his own.

Just as Ivan's spoon symbolizes his civility and longing for humanity, his hat symbolizes his desire to keep the norms of his life outside of the gulag. To preserve his humanity and dignity Shukhov would not eat with his cap on "however cold it was." The struggle to maintain individuality is seen through the conscious decision to take off his hat, even within the brutal temperatures of Siberia, all in order to maintain civilized standards that are expected outside of the gulag. Shukhov holds himself to a higher standard than those around him to serve as a conscious reminder of his dignity. In the prison camp the Zeks are deprived of all material possessions and are required to be uniform with the other prisoners. Shukhov's removal of his hat symbolizes how maintaining strong principals and dignity becomes a means by which Shukhov survives in the camp and maintains his identity. Instead of performing an act of outward rebellion against the Stalinist State, Denisovich has chosen to guard his personal belief system through removing his hat. While many prisoners would beg for scraps "mister quote here" Denisovich choose to cling to his humanity as this was a basis for his survival. Though it would seem easier to cave into the primeval lifestyle, as many of the other prisoners have, he is able to remain present in himself through core beliefs.

Bread represents survival in the camp, because the prisoners' it is the main source of

sustenance. Receiving and consuming bread is a crucial, life-sustaining part of each prisoner's day. Prisoners engross their attention to the weight of the small amounts they receive each day. Shukhov so experienced in the gulags that he can detect a chunk of bread a half-ounce smaller or larger than his normal ration. According to the weight of the chunk of bread, Shukhov plans how and when to eat his bread. With the meager amount of bread given everyday Ivan strives to ration it for himself and only eat what he needs at a moment. Bread is a means of survival, it is not only physical nourishment and sustenance for the Zek's but also it also symbolizes the internal supply for emotional humanistic qualities such as identity, principals, and dignity. Shukhov prided himself because the horrid conditions of the gulag "hadn't turned him into a jackal" and always acted fairly to get his bread and never stole other peoples bread. Ivan limits himself to only what he needs in order to survive while preserving hope for the days to come. When Shukhov had the ability to access "a double helping [of gruel] and bread" he felt "that was going too far." Which demonstrates how he attempts to control himself and emotions to survive and thrive. However in the novella Denisovich shares his bread with Alyoshka a Baptist prisoner who encourages Ivan to find value in faith and find the joy and freedom of his circumstance. Denisovich understands the value of his bread which is an internal source of spiritual sustenance. Solzhenitsyn utilizes bread as a symbol of spiritual nourishment, suggesting religion, hope or individuality, may be the most genuine form of sustenance available to a zek. This is demonstrated through Ivan's gift or bread to Alyoshka expecting nothing in return and being content with himself and his day.

Overall Solzhenitsyn's embedment of various symbols reflects the internal struggles of Shukhov. This is evident through Denisovich's use of the spoon, representing his individuality and humanity. Ivan's hat illustrates his craving for civility and his core beliefs which instill strength in his actions. Finally, the bread served to Denisovich is an illustration of not only physical nourishment, but also spiritual nourishment. Solzhenitsyn uses the symbolism to further instill an implied meaning into this 1962 Russian novella.

Reflective Statement

Through the Group Interactive Oral I was able to gain a greater understanding of the culture in the novella One Day In the Life of Ivan Denisovich by Alexander Solzhenitsyn and understand the time the author spent in the Siberian prisons as well as totalitarianism in the 20th century. We began by learning about Solzhenitsyn and his time in the gulag, as well as the political atmosphere Solzhenitsyn had endured. Solzhenitsyn was imprisoned because he criticized Joseph Stalin the current leader of the time. I first believed that Ivan Denisovich Shukhov and Solzhenitsyn would be the same person because I expected the novella to be more autobiographical however it was based on the life of an "everyman" type of character.

Initially as a 21st century American living in a capitalistic free market society it was very difficult for me to grasp the idea of communism and totalitarianism. Ivan Denisovich Shukhov was sent to gulag for a crime he did not commit, which was similar to the other prisoners at the gulag. The prisoners were sent to the gulag because they were considered "bad communist" and men who did not follow the communist ideals.

However during the group discussion we came to the conclusion that the men had become true communist to survive in the horrid conditions. We saw this irony while discussing the ultimate pride Shukhov had when he was building a wall with the rest of his gang. Due to the fact that I

live in a capitalist society where you earn more when you work more, it boggled my mind that Shukhov would work so hard to make a wall look perfect if he had nothing to gain from it. Though the totalitarian government had taken almost everything from him, Ivan kept his dignity through making a wall he was proud of. This allowed me to understand how people have the motivation to live in a totalitarian/communist regime. Through this discussion I noticed that the main character never resents the communist system. Solzhenitsyn includes several nationalities in his novella, this could understatedly symbolize the unity in the different soviet states. Overall, I have a much greater understanding of the context and culture of the novella through the Group Interactive Oral Presentation.