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Ward No. 6

Anton Chekhov · *1892 · Constance Garnett translation (1921)*

In the yard of a shabby provincial hospital stands a small lodge, overgrown with nettles, where the insane are kept under the care of a brutal watchman, Nikita, who thinks it his duty to beat them. One of the five patients, Gromov, is educated and intelligent. The hospital's doctor, Ragin, is a man of indifference who lets the place decay, and then an unexpected friendship leads him to the ward.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What is the cost of indifference to suffering, and how thin is the line between the doctor and the patient?

Ragin believes that suffering is a matter of how one thinks and that the philosopher need not act. His talks with Gromov, who argues for pain and protest, begin to shake him. The town decides the doctor is mad, and his colleagues put him in the ward, where Nikita beats him. He dies the next day, and almost no one attends. Chekhov makes the case without comment, and the ending is a quiet and terrible irony.

KEY CHARACTERS

Andrey Yefimitch Ragin
The doctor of indifference.

Ivan Dmitritch Gromov
An educated patient.

Nikita
The brutal watchman.

Mihail Averyanitch
The postmaster, Ragin's friend.

Dr. Hobotov
The assistant who replaces him.

Grades 10–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01

The Ward and Gromov

CHAPTERS I–IV

The lodge and its five patients are described. Gromov's history is told: his fear of arrest, the breakdown after his family's ruin, and his arrival in the ward.

- The lodge is a place of filth and neglect.
- Nikita beats the patients as a duty.
- Gromov's fear gives him a mind of its own.

02

The Doctor

CHAPTERS V–VIII

Dr. Ragin, once a believer, is now a philosopher of indifference who reads, drinks tea, and lets the hospital rot. His only friend is the postmaster.

- Ragin once cared about his work.
- He thinks that suffering is only an idea.
- The hospital goes to ruin around him.

03

The Conversations

CHAPTERS IX–XI

Ragin visits Gromov, and the two argue about Stoicism, pain, and the meaning of life. Ragin finds in Gromov an intelligent companion and goes back day after day.

- Gromov argues for protest and feeling.
- Ragin finds the only real talk in the ward.
- The visits are noticed.

04

Suspicion and the Trick

CHAPTERS XII–XVI

The town thinks the doctor has gone mad. He is persuaded to retire and to go on a trip, which his colleagues use to put him under observation.

- The doctor's visits to the ward are gossip.
- His colleagues replace him.
- The trip is a trap.

05

The Ward and the Death

CHAPTERS XVII–XIX

Ragin is shut in Ward No. 6, beaten by Nikita, and dies of a stroke the next day. Only the postmaster and his maid attend the funeral.

- Ragin learns what the ward is.
- Nikita's blows are the end of his theory.
- The funeral is nearly empty.

Indifference | Suffering | Madness | Philosophy

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 10–12

1. Ragin's philosophy is the subject. Ask what Chekhov thinks of it.
2. Gromov and Ragin argue. Notice who has the better arguments.
3. The ending is a reversal. Ask why Chekhov brings the doctor to the ward.
4. The story is a famous one. Think about why Lenin and others read it as a picture of Russia.

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