CLASSICS LIBRARY · STORY MAP

The Eternal Husband

Fyodor Dostoevsky · *1870 · Fred Whishaw translation (1888, titled The Permanent Husband)*

In a hot St. Petersburg summer, a hypochondriac gentleman, Velchaninoff, is followed through the streets by a man in a hat with a mourning band. The man turns out to be Pavel Pavlovitch Trusotsky, the husband of a woman Velchaninoff had known nine years before. Dostoevsky's short novel is a tense, odd study of a man and the husband he wronged.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What does a person do when the past returns in the form of a man he has wronged and who is both pitiful and dangerous?

The book is a game of two minds. Pavel Pavlovitch is humble and also hateful, and Velchaninoff cannot be sure what he wants. A child's death, a plan to remarry, and a night in which Pavel tries to cut Velchaninoff's throat show the depth of the old wound. The ending is a railway-platform scene, two years later, which is both plain and chilling.

KEY CHARACTERS

Alexey Velchaninoff
A hypochondriac gentleman haunted by his past.

Pavel Pavlovitch Trusotsky
The 'permanent' husband, humble and dangerous.

Natalia Vasilievna
Pavel's late wife.

Liza
A child at the center of the story.

Claudia Petrovna Pogoryeltseff
A friend who helps.

the Zachlebnikoffs
A family Pavel courts.

Grades 10–12

Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01

The Man in the Crape Hat

CHAPTERS I–II

Velchaninoff, a hypochondriac, is tormented by memory and is followed by a man in mourning. The man turns out to be Pavel Pavlovitch Trusotsky, his old acquaintance.

- The man in the hat is a figure of dread.
- Velchaninoff is haunted by an old affair.
- The meeting is a mix of awkwardness and menace.

02

Liza

CHAPTERS III–VI

Pavel tells of his wife's death. Velchaninoff finds that Liza is probably his own daughter and takes her to the Pogoryeltseffs.

- Pavel's mourning is double-edged.
- Liza is a child whom Pavel treats cruelly.
- Velchaninoff takes a risk for her.

03

The Child's Illness

CHAPTERS VII–X

Liza falls ill and dies in the country house, in spite of the doctors. Velchaninoff swears to confront Pavel.

- The illness is quick.
- Pavel's response is cold.
- Velchaninoff's anger turns to a vow.

04

The Pursuit

CHAPTERS XI–XIV

Pavel pursues a respectable family's daughter and Velchaninoff follows him. A young rival, Loboff, appears.

- Pavel plans a new marriage.
- Velchaninoff interferes.
- The family's house is a place of comedy and danger.

05

The Razor

CHAPTERS XV–XVI

Pavel tries to cut Velchaninoff's throat in the night and is overpowered and bound. The two part.

- The attack comes in the dark.
- Velchaninoff overpowers him.
- Pavel's explanation is half confession.

06

The Railway Station

CHAPTER XVII

Two years later, Velchaninoff meets Pavel with his new wife on a railway platform and shows him the scar.

- Pavel has a new wife beside him.
- The scar is a reminder of the night.
- The ending is an unresolved meeting.

Guilt · The Past · Jealousy · The Double

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 10–12

1. The title means a man who is a husband above all. Ask what that implies.
2. Velchaninoff and Pavel mirror each other. Watch the shifts.
3. The razor scene is the turning point. Ask what each man wants.
4. The last scene is brief. Think about what it says about the two.

Summaries are original to Classics Library. Read the Fred Whishaw translation (1888, titled The Permanent Husband) (Project Gutenberg #38241), the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/dostoevsky-the-eternal-husband/.