Gooseberries

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ANTON CHEKHOV

Anton Chekov was raised in Taganrog, a port city in Southern Russia. Chekov's mother was a wonderful storyteller and instilled a love of stories in Chekov and his five siblings—his father, however, had a volatile personality and often mishandled money. This culminated in Chekov's parents and siblings fleeing to Moscow in 1876 so that his father could avoid debtor's prison, leaving the teenage Chekov behind in Taganrog to finish his education. Chekov did odd jobs to fund his studies and support his family, all the while reading a wide range of literature in his spare time. In 1879, he was admitted to medical school at I.M. Sechenov First Moscow State Medical University. To support himself and his family while attending school, he published short, satirical vignettes of Russian life in newspapers. By 1884, Chekov had become a practicing doctor, though he made little money and treated the poor for free. Over the next decade, he became chronically ill with tuberculosis but hid his condition from his friends and family, continuing to write short stories that garnered praise from literary critics. Chekov also began to travel throughout Eastern Europe and even to a penal colony in Japan, experiences that deeply influenced his writing. In 1898, after his father's death, Chekov built a villa in Yalta, Crimea, where he continued to write stories and plays. He married actress Olga Knipper in 1901. Chekov eventually succumbed to his tuberculosis in 1904, after which his writing continued to receive critical acclaim. He is widely considered to be one of the greatest short story writers and playwrights of all time.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Gooseberries" takes place in late 19th-century Russia, just after Russia's feudal system was dismantled. For centuries prior, most of Russia's peasant class were serfs (indentured servants forced to do agricultural labor and domestic work for noble landowners). In 1861, Emperor Alexander II freed all serfs with the Emancipation Edict, but former serfs were still required to work for their landlords for an additional two years and weren't given any reparations. All the while, the nobility had their debts forgiven and were allowed to keep their land. These unjust conditions are likely why Ivan Ivanych is so critical of the landowning class in the story. Given that the Ivanyches come from peasant roots—meaning that their forebears were likely serfs—it makes sense that Ivan finds his brother Nikolai's noble affectations, obsession with land ownership, and poor treatment of the local peasants so contemptible.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Chekov was highly influenced by (as well as admired by) fellow Russian writer Leo Tolstoy, whose short story "How Much Land Does a Man Need?" is similar to "Gooseberries" in that it addresses the question of what people need to be happy and live meaningfully. But whereas Tolstoy's conclusion was that the proper way to live was to focus on developing oneself as an individual, Chekov believed that every person is morally obligated to "do good" for society as a whole—a sentiment that Ivan Ivanych expresses in "Gooseberries." In the story, Ivan also quotes Russian poet and novelist Alexander Pushkin (author of *Eugene Onegin*). Beyond his own country's literature, Chekov was influenced by Spanish novelist and playwright Miguel de Cervantes (*Don Quixote*) and German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (*The World as Will and Representation*), both of whose work he read as a teenager. Chekov tended to experiment with form in his writing, believing that the purpose of stories was to raise questions for readers rather than answer them. Modernist short-story writers like Ernest Hemingway ("Hills Like White Elephants") and Raymond Carver ("What We Talk About When We Talk About Love") took inspiration from Chekov's writing, using subtext rather than direct exposition to convey meaning. Carver believed that Chekov was the best short-story writer of all time, even writing his own short story, "Errand," about Chekov's death.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Gooseberries
- **When Written:** 1898
- **Where Written:** Yalta, Crimea
- **When Published:** 1898
- **Literary Period:** Russian Realism
- **Genre:** Short Story; Frame Tale
- **Setting:** 19th-century rural Russia
- **Climax:** Ivan pleads with Alekhin to "Do good!"
- **Antagonist:** Nikolai Ivanych
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Rotten Tomatoes. Chekov was commissioned to write his first play, *The Seagull*, in 1894. It was initially received poorly by critics and was even booed by the audience at its first performance. This deeply discouraged Chekov, leading him to renounce theater altogether for years.

PLOT SUMMARY

Ivan and Burkin are enjoying a long walk in the vast fields outside their village when it begins to rain. The two decide to take cover at their mutual friend Alekhin's sprawling estate, Sofyino, where they find the humble and modestly dressed Alekhin processing grain in one of his barns. Alekhin ushers Ivan and Burkin to the main house, where Alekhin's beautiful maid Pelageya greets them. Alekhin then invites his friends to clean up in his bathing house, but Ivan decides to swim in Alekhin's pond in the rain instead. He repeatedly dives to the bottom and swings his arms delightedly, only emerging when Burkin beckons him back to the house.

The three friends, now clean and dry, settle into Alekhin's drawing room, and Ivan begins to tell Burkin and Alekhin a story about his younger brother Nikolai. He and Nikolai were raised in the countryside, and Nikolai longed to return to this life throughout his adulthood. Ivan loves nature as well, but he never understood the desire to own a confined piece of land—to Ivan, leaving the city for a country estate is a sheltered, indulgent, and spiritually unfulfilling way to live. He believes that one should freely experience all the world has to offer, which means experiencing the whole of nature.

Nevertheless, for over 20 years, Nikolai worked as a civil servant while living a miserly lifestyle to save up for an estate. He even married a widow for her money and proceeded to deprive her of basic necessities (like enough food to eat) until she passed away—something that Ivan says Nikolai never felt guilty about. Nikolai remained obsessed with the goal of owning land, and the ability to grow **gooseberries** on his estate became a kind of symbol of this dream for him.

Finally, in his forties, Nikolai was able to buy an estate called Himalayskoe. When Ivan recently went to visit, he found it unimpressive: the land was covered in dense brush and ditches, and the river alongside it was polluted. What's more, land ownership had seemingly made Nikolai lazy, entitled, and arrogant. When the two brothers ate some gooseberries that Nikolai had grown, Ivan found them bitter and inedible, while Nikolai found them sweet and delicious—a delusion on Nikolai's part, in Ivan's view.

Seeing Nikolai content with such an indulgent and meaningless lifestyle made Ivan miserable. He reflects to Alekhin and Burkin that happy people like Nikolai are only able to maintain their happiness because others suffer in silence. Indeed, Nikolai had become cruel and controlling toward local peasants, abusing his authority over them and demanding they address him as a nobleman. This disturbed Ivan, and when he arrived back home, he felt similarly miserable and alienated in the city.

Having concluded his story, Ivan begins to openly lament his old age. He pleads with Alekhin neither to waste his youth nor to pursue happiness, since doing so only means settling for complacency and comfort—Ivan believes that happiness is the enemy of a meaningful, fulfilling life. By this time, Burkin and Alekhin are bored.

Alekhin is growing tired—he doesn't really understand what Ivan is talking about, but he doesn't want to go to sleep in case his friends say something interesting. Burkin announces that it's time for bed, however, and he and Ivan settle into Alekhin's guestroom. Ivan sets down his pipe on the nightstand before falling asleep—and from the other bed, Burkin lies awake, wondering where the offensive smell of stale tobacco is coming from. Meanwhile, the rainstorm persists, beating on the windows all night.

CHARACTERS

Ivan Ivanych – Ivan is a middle-aged veterinarian who spends most of the story telling his friends Alekhin and Burkin about his younger brother, Nikolai. For decades, Ivan has been dismayed by Nikolai's dream of owning land, as he finds this lifestyle isolating, meaningless, and spiritually deadening. He tells Alekhin and Burkin about his recent visit to Nikolai's country estate, where he found that his brother had become fat, lazy, and pompous. When the two dined on **gooseberries** that Nikolai grew on his land, Ivan found them too "tough and sour" to eat and believed that Nikolai's enjoyment of the berries was delusional. This is a symbolic parallel to how Ivan views Nikolai's lifestyle and demeanor: he believes that Nikolai is deluding himself into being happy, when he's actually arrogant and entitled and lives a sheltered, unfulfilling life. Yet, as Ivan tells this story, it becomes obvious that he's somewhat hypocritical: he admits that he isn't happy living in a town, and he fails to clearly define what, exactly, constitutes the meaningful life that he believes Nikolai should be living. Ivan comes off as an old man who's been embittered by his own unfulfilling life and now resents people who've found happiness. He urges his younger friend Alekhin to "Do good!" and take advantage of his youth and strength while he can—but it seems like Alekhin is already doing that, and that perhaps Ivan is the one who's wasted his life. Ivan is also adamant that people should avoid comfort and embrace the suffering and chaos of the outside world, yet the story ends with Ivan sleeping in Alekhin's comfortable guest bedroom, safely sheltered away from a rainstorm. Readers are thus left with the impression that Ivan is in denial of his own actions, a man who believes he knows the path to fulfillment yet fails to pursue that path himself.

Nikolai Ivanych – Nikolai is Ivan's brother. He's two years younger than Ivan, and he becomes a government employee at 19 while Ivan is studying to become a veterinarian. Nikolai and Ivan had an idyllic childhood in the countryside on their father's modest estate, and Nikolai desperately wants to return to this lifestyle in adulthood—he's totally fixated on owning a country

estate, and the ability to grow **gooseberries** on his own land symbolizes this dream for him. Nikolai spends over 20 years living an extremely frugal lifestyle to save as much money as possible, to the point that he marries a widow for her money and then deprives her of enough food to eat until she dies. When Nikolai is in his forties, he finally achieves his dream, buying a rural estate called Himalayskoe. This estate isn't what Nikolai imagined (it's covered in dense shrubbery and backs up against a polluted river), yet he still seems proud and fulfilled. But his land ownership also makes him lazy and arrogant: though Nikolai comes from humble peasant roots, he now refuses to do any work, demands to be addressed as a nobleman, and mistreats the local peasants. When Ivan visits Himalayskoe, and the brothers dine on the gooseberries from Nikolai's garden, Ivan finds them bitter, while Nikolai finds them sweet. And just like Ivan believes that Nikolai deludes himself into enjoying the berries, so too does he believe that Nikolai deludes himself into enjoying a meaningless, sheltered, and overly indulgent life. Nikolai's character more broadly represents the rising landowning class in Russia in the late 19th century (when the story is set), implying that wealthy landowners tend to be complacent, entitled, and self-deluding.

Alekhin – Alekhin is Ivan and Burkin's friend whom they visit at his estate, Sofyino, to seek shelter from the rain. Alekhin is a landowner and farmer of about 40 who has an intelligent and artistic air about him. Yet he's also notably humble, dresses like a peasant, and spends all of his time doing manual labor—he even forgets to bathe for months at a time. Like Ivan's brother Nikolai, Alekhin is successful and affluent; his estate is even more sprawling and impressive than Nikolai's. But unlike the selfish and entitled Nikolai, Alekhin is very kind and generous. When Ivan and Burkin arrive unexpectedly at Sofyino to seek shelter from a rainstorm, he greets them warmly and spends the rest of the day making them feel welcome and engaging them in conversation. In this way, Alekhin serves as a foil to Nikolai's character—and to 19th-century Russia's landowning class more generally—providing an example of how wealthy landowners don't necessarily have to be greedy or morally corrupt.

Burkin – Burkin is a high school teacher who's friends with Ivan and Alekhin. At the beginning of the story, he and Ivan are walking the fields outside their village when it begins to rain, and Burkin suggests that they take shelter at their mutual friend Alekhin's estate. Not much is revealed about Burkin's character; he fades into the background and remains mostly silent while Ivan tells him and Alekhin a story about his brother Nikolai. After Ivan ends up ranting about Nikolai's sheltered, meaningless life and urging Alekhin not to let himself befall the same fate, Burkin seems bored and fed up, declaring that it's time for bed. He and Ivan turn in for the night in Alekhin's guest bedroom, but Burkin is unable to sleep because he's distracted by the odor of stale tobacco in Ivan's pipe on the nightstand. That the story ends with Burkin, seemingly one of Ivan's closest friends, put off by this smell suggests that Burkin is similarly put off by Ivan's staleness in his old age. Ivan's exhortations about how to live a good life have offended and repelled his friends (and perhaps readers, too) rather than inspiring them to live meaningfully.

Pelageya – Pelageya is Alekhin's young maid. When Ivan and Burkin arrive at Alekhin's country estate to take shelter from the rain, Pelageya is the one who greets the men at the door of the main house, and they're stunned by how beautiful she is. Pelageya doesn't play a particularly active role in the story, simply completing domestic tasks and serving the men with whatever they need. Nevertheless, her youthful beauty is mentioned several times, which characterizes her as an embodiment of the youth and potential that Ivan wishes he still had—and that he urges his friends not to waste.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

HAPPINESS, SUFFERING, AND MEANING

In "Gooseberries," Ivan Ivanych is highly skeptical of those who pursue happy, comfortable lives—he believes that suffering is the precursor to a meaningful life, and that chasing happiness is the wrong path because it leads to stagnation and complacency. Most of the story is a frame tale (a story within a story) in which Ivan and tells his friends Alekhin and Burkin about his brother Nikolai, who spent decades of his life saving up for a country estate where he could live an easy, comfortable lifestyle. Ivan, however, thinks that settling into a happy life in this way is selfish and delusional, since it merely insulates a person from the realities of the outside world. Instead, he argues that one should embrace suffering and pursue the most meaningful life possible. But, in the end, Ivan is the one who is unhappy, suggesting that the key to a fulfilling life is actually subjective—and perhaps even impossible to define.

Ivan thinks that Nikolai's version of happiness is selfish, misguided, and delusional. For Nikolai, ultimate happiness means owning a secluded estate in the countryside. When Nikolai finally achieves this decades-long dream, Ivan goes to visit him—and although his brother is clearly happy, Ivan doesn't believe that this happiness is genuine. He tells his friends Burkin and Alekhin, "To leave town, quit the struggle and noise of life, go and hide in your country place, isn't life, it's egoism, laziness, it's a sort of monasticism, but a monasticism

without spiritual endeavor." In other words, he doesn't think that Nikolai's new lifestyle is conducive to genuine happiness—it merely insulates him from "the struggle and noise of life," which Ivan seems to think is the root of meaningful, spiritually fulfilling life. When Ivan goes to visit Nikolai, the two brothers eat **gooseberries** that Nikolai has grown on his land—the ability to grow and eat gooseberries has, over the course of Nikolai's adulthood, symbolized his dream of becoming a landowner. Nikolai delights in how delicious they are, whereas Ivan find them "tough and sour." He thinks of writer Alexander Pushkin's quote, "Dearer to us than a host of truths is an exalting illusion," implying that Nikolai's happiness and fulfillment is an illusion (represented by his enjoyment of the bitter gooseberries). Again, Ivan thinks that the comfortable lifestyle Nikolai enjoys is nothing but stagnation and self-delusion. According to him, happy people are only able to stay contented because unhappy people (like the peasants who live near Nikolai's estate) suffer in silence. Ivan believes that "At the door of every contented, happy man somebody should stand with a little hammer, constantly tapping, to remind him that unhappy people exist," emphasizing his disdain for people who sacrifice a life full of meaningful ups and downs for a life that's always comfortable.

But Ivan is the one who's dissatisfied with his life, suggesting that the definition of a meaningful life is more subjective than he'd like to admit. Both Nikolai and Ivan's friend Alekhin are well-off landowners who lead the very lifestyle that Ivan condemns, yet they seem fulfilled—whether this fulfillment is illusory or not. Nikolai "had attained his goal in life, had gotten what he wanted, who was content with his fate and with himself," and Alekhin seems similarly at peace and content in his role as a wealthy farmer. Their achievements and lifestyles are certainly meaningful to them, even if they don't seem that way to Ivan. Ivan, meanwhile, says that he's miserable in the city, which he previously claimed was where the meaningful "struggle and noise of life" happens. What's more, he admits to Alekhin and Burkin that he, too, enjoys a comfortable lifestyle while lecturing others about patiently enduring their suffering. Ivan, in other words, is somewhat hypocritical: he claims to know what constitutes a meaningful life, yet he seems to think that he's wasted his own, lamenting over his old age and exclaiming, "If only I were young!" He also tells Alekhin to "Do good!"—that is, to avoid wasting his own youth and energy, and to pursue "something more intelligent and great" than a peaceful country life. Yet, crucially, Ivan never gives a solid definition of what that "something" is. He clearly views suffering and immersing oneself in a wide variety of experiences as more meaningful than pursuing wealth and stability—yet he doesn't seem to find meaning in his own suffering or his own life in the city. This suggests that Ivan is perhaps just as misguided as he believes Nikolai is, and that meaning and happiness aren't mutually exclusive.

At the end of the story, Ivan and Burkin go to bed in Alekhin's guest bedroom for the night. Before falling asleep, Ivan leaves his pipe on the nightstand; from the other bed, Burkin lies awake, wondering where the strong smell of stale tobacco is coming from. That the story ends with Ivan fast asleep, blissfully unaware of this "heavy odor" of staleness at his bedside, conveys the sense that Ivan himself emanates a stale and unpleasant quality to those around him. Rather than inspiring his friends to embrace suffering and pursue meaningful lives, he has aired his own misery out into the open, leaving readers questioning whether Ivan's rejection of an idyllic country life is rooted not in genuine concern but in resentment of other people's happiness. Further, the story seems to suggest through the character of Alekhin—who primarily thinks about working on his farm and doesn't understand what Ivan is talking about through his long rant—that it is the focus on "practical matters" rather than ideals or illusions that offers real contentment, though one might argue that even that sort of contentment is focused narrowly and could therefore itself be construed as somewhat insular and selfish. Ultimately, the story offers no conclusion about what *does* offer a meaningful, happy life—the story captures the mystery and tragedy of the search for meaning and happiness, rather than offer easy answers.

WEALTH AND STATUS

In "Gooseberries," Ivan Ivanych tells his friends the story of Nikolai Ivanych, his younger brother who lives an extremely frugal lifestyle for decades in order to save up for a plot of land in the countryside. Nikolai does this at the expense of his own well-being and his relationships, and once he's achieved his goal, he becomes pompous and entitled. Watching his brother transform from a civil servant of modest means to a "fat landowner" who not only eschews his peasant roots but also treats other peasants badly leads Ivan to believe that upward mobility—that is, increased wealth and social status—tends to corrupt people, making them arrogant and insensitive. However, the story also offers up Ivan's wealthy but kind and generous friend Alekhin as a foil to Nikolai's character, showing that a person's *attitude* toward what they have is more indicative of their character than money and status themselves.

As Ivan tells Nikolai's story to his friends Burkin and Alekhin, he makes the case that money has a morally perverse or even maddening effect on people. "Money, like vodka, does strange things to a man," Ivan says. He gives the example of a man in his village who desperately ate all of his money and lottery tickets before he died, so that no one else could have them. Ivan also shares an anecdote of a man who lost his foot in a train accident—but rather than being concerned about his bleeding wound, he begged his rescuers (Ivan among them) to find his amputated foot, so that he wouldn't lose the 20 rubles he hid in

his boot. In both cases, the men in question were so possessed by money that they were driven to irrational behavior, valuing wealth above all else. Furthermore, Ivan shares how Nikolai deprived himself for over 20 years: he lived so frugally that he dressed in rags and rarely ate, and he married a widow for money rather than love. He proceeded to deprive his wife of basic needs (like enough food to eat), to the point that she died three years into their marriage. Ivan bitterly reflects that Nikolai "never thought for a moment that he was guilty of her death." In this way, Nikolai is so single-mindedly obsessed with saving money for his future estate that he sacrifices his wife's well-being in the process, prioritizing wealth over relationships to a deadly degree.

After decades of saving, when Nikolai is finally able to purchase the country home of his dreams, his newfound wealth and higher status among the local peasants makes him pompous and out of touch with his own peasant-class roots. Ivan tells Burkin and Alekhin about his recent visit to Nikolai's estate: his brother had become fat and lazy, a stark contrast to the scarcity and undernourishment that defined his life for so long. He was now "living like a landowner," suggesting that a gluttonous, indolent lifestyle is characteristic of everyone wealthy enough to own land. Nikolai is so immersed in this newfound identity as a nobleman that he becomes angry when local peasants fail to address him as "Your Honor"—conveniently forgetting the fact that "[Nikolai and Ivan's] grandfather was a peasant and our father a soldier." Indeed, Nikolai is adamant that "I know the people and know how to handle them […] The people like me. I have only to move a finger, and the people do whatever I want." He's convinced that he's inherently superior to the peasant class despite his own common roots, and he alternately abuses his power over them and bribes them with alcohol to keep their favor. Wealth, in Nikolai's case, has indeed gone to his head.

But Ivan's friend Alekhin is also a well-off landowner, yet he's the exact opposite of Nikolai—suggesting that wealth and high social status aren't inherently corruptive. Alekhin seems to be even wealthier than Nikolai: his estate features multiple barns, a large pond, a bathing house, and a large two-story main house. It's also situated on a clean river, whereas the one bordering Nikolai's land is contaminated by factory runoff. Yet despite being a man of means, Alekhin is notably modest. While Nikolai is too lazy to do manual labor, Alekhin is doing the hard, messy work of processing grain when Ivan and Burkin arrive at his estate. He shows his humility when he admits to his friends that "I don't think I've bathed since spring." Alekhin is also kind, welcoming, and generous, greeting his friends warmly and allowing them to bathe, change into clean clothes, and sleep at his home—a stark contrast to Nikolai's selfishness and entitlement. Indeed, after Ivan tells Nikolai's story, Alekhin doesn't even understand the point Ivan is trying to make about landowners: "Whether what Ivan Ivanych had said was intelligent or correct, [Alekhin] did not try to figure out; his guests were not talking of grain, or hay, or tar, but about something that had no direct bearing on his life, and he was glad and wanted them to go on." Although Alekhin is certainly successful and affluent, he lives more like a peasant than the "squire" Nikolai has become, working hard and not concerning himself with anything but practical matters of farming. With this, the story seems to suggest that, while money can certainly do "strange things" to people, achieving wealth and land ownership doesn't guarantee that a person will become morally corrupt. Alekhin's generosity and modesty, in contrast with Nikolai's arrogance and cruelty, indicates that whether one has more or less than others, their attitude toward what they have is what matters.

MODERNITY, ISOLATION, AND NATURE

City-dweller Ivan Ivanych feels plagued by the isolation that he believes is inherent to modern lifestyles. In late 19th-century Russia, where the story is set, it was becoming increasingly common for people to live in cities or to be able to own land. And while Ivan rails against the idea of rural living—that is, relegating oneself to an insular plot of land in the countryside—throughout the story, he also reveals that he's miserable with his own lifestyle in a town, as he feels alienated from the other people there. The only instances in the story when Ivan seems truly happy are fleeting moments when he's able to be out in nature without the trappings of modern life. This suggests that the lifestyles of both rural landowners and city-dwellers are isolating and unnatural—instead, Ivan favors complete freedom and an unbridled immersion in nature.

Ivan's brother Nikolai owns a country estate, the very idea of which Ivan finds limiting and isolating. When Nikolai first shares his dream of becoming a landowner, Ivan is skeptical: he thinks that "I never sympathized with this desire to lock himself up for life in his own country place. It is a common saying that a man needs only six feet of earth. But it's a corpse that needs six feet, not a man." In likening rural living to a kind of symbolic death, Ivan suggests that the modern tendency to resign oneself to a confined swath of land is unnatural and restrictive. Furthermore, as Ivan recounts Nikolai's story to his friends Burkin and Alekhin, he's adamant that "To leave town, quit the struggle and noise of life, go and hide in your country place, isn't life, it's egoism, laziness, it's a sort of monasticism, but a monasticism without spiritual endeavor. Man needs, not six feet of earth, not a country place, but the whole earth, the whole of nature, where he can express at liberty all the properties and particularities of his free spirit." With this, Ivan makes the case that to leave the city for an isolated rural lifestyle is to leave behind the richness that makes life worth living. And just because people who live in the countryside are closer to nature doesn't mean they're truly immersed in it—one needs "the whole earth, the whole of nature," not a limited piece

of land that's manicured and cultivated to the owner's liking.

But for all of Ivan's complaints about rural landowners, he also admits that he isn't satisfied with city life. After Ivan goes to visit Nikolai at his estate, Ivan returns to his town and finds it miserable and isolating. He tells Burkin and Alekhin that "it has become unbearable for me to live in town. I'm oppressed by the peace and quiet, I'm afraid to look in the windows, because there's no more painful spectacle for me now than a happy family sitting around a table and drinking tea." Having experienced Nikolai's isolated life in the countryside, Ivan seems to find that the city isn't all that different in comparison—there's more "peace and quiet" than "the struggle and noise of life," as even city-dwellers tend to live insular lives within family units rather than immersing themselves in the outside world. With this, Ivan implies that living in a city isn't any better than owning land in the country—in his estimation, both of these versions of modern life are lonely, limiting, and depressing.

Instead, the story suggests that Ivan's reverence for "the whole earth, the whole of nature" is preferable: people should experience nature in a free, unbridled way rather than trying to avoid it (in the city) or trying to mold and control it (in the country). There are only two points in the story when Ivan seems genuinely happy: the first occurs in the opening paragraph, when he and Burkin are wandering through the vast fields outside of a village. Ivan and Burkin are "imbued with love for these fields, and both thought how great, how beautiful this land was." In this instance, the two friends are able to experience nature in a way that's spiritually uplifting rather than deadening—they're not limited to an isolated "six feet of earth" and are therefore able to feel free and happy and to appreciate the natural beauty around them. The second time Ivan seems happy occurs when Burkin suggests that they seek cover from the rain at Alekhin's house, and Alekhin invites them to wash up in his bathing house. Rather than joining Burkin and Alekhin, though, Ivan chooses to swim in Alekhin's pond in the rain, repeatedly diving under the water and exclaiming "Ah, my God." The lighthearted way Ivan swings his arms, dives to touch the bottom of the pond, and cries out in delight indicate that interacting with nature in this way is preferable to sheltering oneself from it.

But even Ivan falls victim to the human tendency to buffer oneself against the elements and indulge in the comforts of modern life—for instance, he takes comfort in the warmth of Alekhin's house, clean clothing, and tea served by Alekhin's beautiful maid Pelageya. And at the end of the story, when Ivan and Burkin go to sleep in Alekhin's guest bedroom, Ivan says, "Lord forgive us sinners!" before pulling the bed covers over his head. This exclamation seems to suggest that he sees himself as a hypocritical "sinner" for decrying modern comforts yet taking solace in the amenities of Alekhin's home. The story's final line, "Rain beat on the windows all night," leaves readers with an image of Ivan and Burkin insulated from the harsh outside world as they sleep—suggesting that even though it's more freeing and fulfilling to immerse oneself in nature, the comforts of a sheltered life are often too tempting to resist.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

GOOSEBERRIES

Nikolai's gooseberries represent the idea that people tend to delude themselves into happiness rather than accepting the truth. For over 20 years, Nikolai lives an extremely frugal lifestyle in order to save toward his ultimate dream of owning a country estate. During this time, the ability to grow and eat his own gooseberries is central to Nikolai's vision of his ideal future. When he finally achieves his dream of owning land, and he and his brother Ivan eat the gooseberries from Nikolai's own bushes, Nikolai relishes in how sweet and delicious they are—but Ivan finds them too "tough and sour" to eat.

Reflecting on Nikolai's greedy enjoyment of the gooseberries, Ivan quotes writer Alexander Pushkin, who said, "Dearer to us than a host of truths is an exalting illusion." In this case, the gooseberries represent the "exalting illusion" of Nikolai's entire lifestyle: he appears wealthy, comfortable, and fulfilled, but Ivan believes that Nikolai's happiness is actually rooted in self-delusion. In reality, Nikolai's estate isn't how he imagined it would be (it's covered in dense brush and sits on a polluted river)—and Nikolai has become fat, lazy, and arrogant since becoming a landowner. Furthermore, he was only able to afford the land by living a miserly lifestyle for decades, sacrificing relationships and his own well-being to save as much money as possible.

The brothers' opposite perceptions of how the gooseberries taste thus represent their opposite views of what makes life meaningful. Nikolai finds the gooseberries sweet, which parallels his rosy view of his own circumstances. Ivan, on the other hand, finds the gooseberries sour, which reflects his opinion that people like Nikolai deny the ugly truth of their lives to remain blissfully ignorant and convince themselves that they're fulfilled. Of course, readers don't know what the gooseberries *actually* taste like—it could be that Nikolai is indeed deluding himself into believing that they're sweet. Or, it could be that the bitterness Ivan tastes is his *own* delusion, a reflection of his resentment toward Nikolai for achieving happiness in the countryside while Ivan himself remains miserable in the city. The gooseberries, then, symbolize all forms of the "exalting illusions" that dominate people's lives.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Modern Library edition of *Selected Stories of Anton Chekov* published in 2000.

Gooseberries Quotes

Ivan Ivanych went outside, threw himself noisily into the water and swam under the rain, swinging his arms widely, and he made waves, and the white lilies swayed on the waves; he reached the middle of the pond and dove, and a moment later appeared in another place and swam further, and kept diving, trying to reach the bottom. "Ah, my God…" he repeated delightedly. "Ah, my God…" He swam as far as the mill, talked about something with the peasants there and turned back, and in the middle of the pond lay face up to the rain. Burkin and Alekhin were already dressed and ready to go, but he kept swimming and diving.

Related Characters: Ivan Ivanych (speaker), Alekhin, Burkin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 313

Explanation and Analysis

When Ivan and Burkin take shelter from a rainstorm at their friend Alekhin's estate, Alekhin offers to let them wash the mud off of themselves in his bathing house. Rather than joining his two friends in the bathing house, however, Ivan opts to swim in Alekhin's pond, in the rain. Soon after this passage, he professes his distaste for the landowning class, as he believes that confining oneself to a plot of cultivated land—as opposed to experiencing the entire breadth of nature in its untamed form—is unnatural and even sinful. Here, then, Ivan is experiencing the natural world the way he believes everyone should: without manmade limitations, and without any effort to control his environment or shield himself from the elements.

This passage can also be read symbolically as a kind of baptism for Ivan: in Christianity, the act of submerging oneself in water (as Ivan repeatedly dives underwater here) is a religious rite that typically represents spiritual cleansing of sin and/or entry into a particular church. His repeated utterance of "Ah, my God," further suggests that this is a religious experience for him: physically immersing himself in nature has a cleansing, freeing effect on his spirit. This again corresponds with Ivan's belief that trying to insulate oneself from the elements or manipulate the natural environment to one's liking is sinful—instead, one should surrender to nature and experience it in all its glory.

Furthermore, his rejection of a warm bath in favor of swimming in the rain (likely a somewhat uncomfortable activity, given the cold rain and pond water) begins to imply that Ivan sees suffering as something to be embraced rather than avoided. Later on, Ivan will argue that experiencing "the struggle and noise of life" is meaningful and fulfilling, whereas pursuing constant comfort and happiness is spiritually deadening. His decision to willingly embrace the minor suffering of a cold swim—and his joy in doing so—thus speaks to the idea that coddling and protecting oneself from discomfort is unfulfilling and even immoral.

At the same time, just after this passage Ivan is beckoned by his friends to leave the pond and to come up into the warm house, which he does. So that story both shows how the sort of direct engagement with nature and the elements that Ivan enjoys in the pond can offer ecstasy and religious fulfillment, but also that such experiences—for humans, at least—are short-lived. Ivan can't swim in the pond forever.

It's a common saying that a man needs only six feet of earth. But it's a corpse that needs six feet, not a man. And they also say now that if our intelligentsia is drawn to the soil and longs for country places, it's a good thing. But these country places are the same six feet of earth. To leave town, quit the struggle and noise of life, go and hide in your country place, isn't life, it's egoism, laziness, it's a sort of monasticism, but a monasticism without spiritual endeavor. Man needs, not six feet of earth, not a country place, but the whole earth, the whole of nature, where he can express at liberty all the properties and particularities of his free spirit.

Related Characters: Ivan Ivanych (speaker), Burkin, Alekhin, Nikolai Ivanych

Related Themes:

Page Number: 314

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs as Ivan begins to tell his friends Alekhin and Burkin about his brother, Nikolai, who for decades dreamt of owning an estate in the countryside. Although Ivan and Nikolai shared an idyllic childhood on a rural estate and both love the outdoors, the two brothers disagree on the proper way to experience nature (and, more generally, the proper way to live). Ivan believes that confining oneself

to a limited piece of land is equivalent to appropriating "six feet of earth" for a dead body—that is, he thinks that land ownership is unnatural, a kind of spiritual death. Instead, a person needs "the whole earth, the whole of nature" where they can freely experience all that the natural world has to offer.

Furthermore, Ivan views Nikolai's desired move from the town to the country as "hid[ing]" away from "the struggle and noise of life." In Ivan's view, some amount of suffering is necessary to lead a meaningful life. He thinks that trying to protect oneself from life's ups and downs and lead a consistently happy life, as Nikolai wants to do, is self-centered, lazy, and spiritually unfulfilling. The fact that Ivan describes the life of a landowner as "a monasticism without spiritual endeavor" further suggests that he sees such a lifestyle—in which one insulates oneself from hardship and experiences nature in a limited, artificial way—as sinful.

> Money, like vodka, does strange things to a man.

Related Characters: Ivan Ivanych (speaker), Burkin, Alekhin, Nikolai Ivanych

Related Themes:

Page Number: 315

Explanation and Analysis

As Ivan tells his friends Alekhin and Burkin about his brother Nikolai's dream of owning a country estate, he makes this statement about money. He then goes on to tell them two anecdotes: one about a man from his village who desperately ate all of his money and lottery tickets before he died, and one about a man who lost his foot in a train accident and was more concerned with the money he'd hidden in his boot than with his wound. In both of these stories, money drives the men in question to extreme measures, supporting Ivan's opinion that money "does strange things"—that is, it makes people behave irrationally and can even corrupt their character (much like alcohol has the potential to do).

Ivan proposes this idea to his friends to better explain what he believes happened to his brother over the years. As Nikolai pursued his dream of land ownership on a civil servant's meager salary, he scrimped and saved as much as possible in order to afford his future estate. This extreme frugality seemed to have a similarly corruptive effect on Nikolai as it did on the men from the anecdotes: Nikolai married a widow solely for her money, and Ivan believes that the way Nikolai deprived himself and his wife of basic needs (like enough to eat) for the sake of saving money caused Nikolai's wife to die. (Her cause of death isn't specified in the story, but it's implied that malnourishment played a role.) In this way, Nikolai prioritized money above all else—even his late wife's well-being.

Furthermore, Ivan later shares that, after finally buying his estate, Nikolai has become fat, lazy, and pompous. Nikolai's trajectory from humble civil servant to miser to arrogant landowner sets up the idea that increased wealth and social status can indeed do "strange things to a man." In Nikolai's case, single-mindedly pursuing land ownership causes him to lose touch with his morals and become greedy and cruel.

> "'I know the people and know how to handle them,' he said. 'The people like me. I have only to move a finger, and the people do whatever I want.'
>
> "And, note, it was all said with a kindly, intelligent smile. He repeated twenty times: 'We, the nobility,' 'I, as a nobleman'—obviously he no longer remembered that our grandfather was a peasant and our father a soldier.

Related Characters: Nikolai Ivanych, Ivan Ivanych (speaker), Burkin, Alekhin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 316

Explanation and Analysis

As Ivan tells Alekhin and Burkin about visiting his brother Nikolai's new estate, he talks about how land ownership made Nikolai arrogant and elitist, and quotes Nikolai bragging about his power. Having experienced a rise in class status from civil servant to landowner, Nikolai boasts to Ivan about being a "nobleman" and knowing "how to handle" the peasants who live near his estate, as he knows how to influence them to "do whatever [he] want[s]."

This offends Ivan because he and Nikolai are only two generations removed from peasantry—and prior to the late 19th century (when the story is set), the Russian peasant class was subjugated and oppressed. Wealthy landowners like Nikolai often brutalized and exploited peasant serfs for their labor, essentially treating them like slaves. Ivan's disgust at the way Nikolai eschews his peasant roots and takes advantage of lower-class people makes sense, then: he likely views Nikolai's attitude as disrespectful and

dismissive of how their family members suffered in the past.

The way Nikolai speaks here supports Ivan's belief that wealth tends to make people shallow, immoral, and cruel. Ivan's friend Alekhin, however, is also a landowner—yet he comes off as humble and kind throughout the story. So, while this quote speaks to the idea that money is morally corruptive, Alekhin's character in the story complicates this notion and suggests that wealth isn't inherently bad. Rather, a person's *attitude* toward what they have is what determines their moral fiber.

"They were tough and sour, but as Pushkin said, 'Dearer to us than a host of truths is an exalting illusion.' I saw a happy man, whose cherished dream had so obviously come true, who had attained his goal in life, had gotten what he wanted, who was content with his fate and with himself. For some reason there had always been something sad mixed with my thoughts about human happiness, but now, at the sight of a happy man, I was overcome by an oppressive feeling close to despair."

Related Characters: Ivan Ivanych (speaker), Nikolai Ivanych

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 317

Explanation and Analysis

After Nikolai buys his country estate, his brother Ivan visits him there, and the two of them eat gooseberries that Nikolai has grown on his land. While Nikolai finds the berries sweet, Ivan finds them "tough and sour," and he recalls Russian writer Alexander Pushkin's quote about people's tendency to delude themselves into happiness rather than accepting the truth.

Throughout the story, the ability to grow and eat his own gooseberries symbolizes Nikolai's broader dream of owning an estate (which he spends 20 years saving toward). The brothers' opposite perceptions of the berries thus represent their differing opinions of the lifestyle Nikolai has achieved. Whereas Nikolai acts as though his new life as a wealthy landowner is happy and fulfilling, Ivan believes that it's shallow and empty—and that it's made Nikolai pompous, entitled, and cruel. In Ivan's opinion, an easy, comfortable life like Nikolai's is spiritually deadening because it robs a person of life's meaningful ups and downs. Rather than admitting this, though, Nikolai buys into the "exalting illusion" that his life is meaningful.

However, Ivan's extreme reaction to his brother's happiness—being "overcome by an oppressive feeling close to despair"—hints that his opinions are based in resentment rather than genuine wisdom or concern for Nikolai. Readers have no way of knowing what the gooseberries actually taste like, so it's possible that *Ivan* is the one deluding himself into believing that they're sour. If this is the case, Ivan's self-delusion about the gooseberries would suggest that he's only imagining that Nikolai's life is meaningless—when really, Nikolai is genuinely happy and fulfilled. Just as Nikolai could be lying to himself, so too could Ivan be denying the fact that he's jealous and resentful of what Nikolai has achieved.

This perhaps suggests that happiness and meaning aren't mutually exclusive, as Ivan believes they are—and that there isn't a single path to a fulfilling life. In this way, the gooseberries become connected to not just Nikolai's dream of a good life, but everyone in the story's differing views of what constitutes a good life, and the ways that those dreams are always flawed, complicated, and look different to different people.

"[…] obviously the happy man feels good only because the unhappy bear their burden silently, and without that silence happiness would be impossible. It's a general hypnosis. At the door of every contented, happy man somebody should stand with a little hammer, constantly tapping, to remind him that unhappy people exist, that however happy he may be, sooner or later life will show him its claws, some calamity will befall him—illness, poverty, loss—and nobody will hear or see, just as he doesn't hear or see others now. But there is nobody with a little hammer the happy man lives on, and the petty cares of life stir him only slightly, as wind stirs an aspen—and everything is fine.

Related Characters: Ivan Ivanych (speaker), Burkin, Alekhin, Nikolai Ivanych

Related Themes:

Page Number: 318

Explanation and Analysis

As Ivan tells Alekhin and Burkin about his visit to his brother Nikolai's estate, he argues that "the happy man feels good only because the unhappy bear their burden silently."

Having spent most of the story criticizing the wealthy Nikolai for his greed and elitism, Ivan implies that money enables people like his brother to avoid pain—"illness, poverty, loss"—in a way that disenfranchised people cannot. And it's only possible for them to do so because these oppressed people suffer privately, on the fringes of society, where rich landowners like Nikolai don't have to acknowledge them. In this sense, Ivan suggests that money and social status tend to make people cold and unsympathetic to others' troubles—and that wealthy people's contentment depends on poor people's quiet suffering.

This quote also speaks to Ivan's ongoing point that pursuing a happy and comfortable lifestyle (like Nikolai's) only cuts people off from deeper meaning that could be found through enduring and overcoming suffering. Ivan seems to find discomfort invigorating and spiritually fulfilling: he previously suggested that "the struggle and noise of life" is what gives people meaning. Happiness, then, is a misguided aspiration—people whose "petty cares of life stir [them] only slightly" may be comfortable and content, but Ivan sees this as a weak-minded and empty way to live.

Instead, Ivan suggests, happy people should constantly be reminded that misfortune and tragedy are inevitable parts of life—no one, no matter how privileged or lucky, can outrun these things forever. In Ivan's mind, unhappiness isn't something to hide or insulate oneself from. Rather, it's something to confront head-on, since a life is only meaningful and fair if it contains both hardship and success.

At the same time, Ivan himself is generally unhappy, and his view of life in which happiness is always by necessity connected to immorality and blindness to the pain of others could be described as something that sucks all of the joy out of life and makes life tough and sour—just the way that his brother's gooseberries tasted to him.

"I left my brother's early the next morning, and since then it has become unbearable for me to live in town. I'm oppressed by the peace and quiet, I'm afraid to look in the windows, because there's no more painful spectacle for me now than a happy family sitting around a table and drinking tea. I'm old and not fit for struggle, I'm not even capable of hatred. I only grieve inwardly, become irritated, vexed, my head burns at night from a flood of thoughts, and I can't sleep…Ah, if only I were young!"

Related Characters: Ivan Ivanych (speaker), Burkin, Alekhin, Nikolai Ivanych

Related Themes:

Page Number: 319

Explanation and Analysis

Ivan admits to Alekhin and Burkin that ever since he visited his brother Nikolai's country estate, he's felt miserable living in his town. Throughout the story, Ivan has railed against Nikolai's lifestyle as a wealthy landowner, arguing that it's unnatural for people to restrict themselves to an artificial, cultivated plot of land. Moving away from the city, Ivan previously suggested, is cowardly and spiritually deadening because it insulates people from the "struggle and noise" that makes life meaningful. Here, though, he admits that as unberable as he found Nikolai's country life to be, he's equally disillusioned with urban living—he feels that he's "oppressed by the peace and quiet" of *both* of these modern lifestyles. In fact, the only moments in the story when Ivan seems truly content are when he's out in nature without boundaries to limit him or creature comforts to buffer him against the elements. This unbridled way of interacting with the world, it's implied, is preferable to the trappings of modern life, whether rural or urban.

Ivan is notably candid with his two friends here: he admits that other people's happiness pains him, that he's old and weak, and that he longs for his lost youth. These admissions confirm something that the story has only hinted at thus far: that Ivan's distaste for sheltered lifestyles is rooted in envy and resentment of others. His words here signal that his advice about living meaningfully should be taken with a grain of salt—after all, his own life doesn't seem particularly fulfilling. Eschewing happiness and comfort, it seems, doesn't guarantee a meaningful life.

"Pavel Konstantinych!" he said in an entreating voice, "don't settle in, don't let yourself fall asleep! As long as you're young, strong, energetic, don't weary of doing good! There is no happiness and there shouldn't be, and if there is any meaning and purpose in life, then that meaning and purpose are not at all in our happiness, but in something more intelligent and great. Do good!"

And Ivan Ivanych said all this with a pitiful, pleading smile, as if he were asking personally for himself.

Related Characters: Ivan Ivanych (speaker), Alekhin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 319

Explanation and Analysis

After lamenting his own lost youth, Ivan pleads with his younger friend, Alekhin, to resist complacency and do something meaningful with his life. Throughout the story, Ivan has been adamant that happiness and meaning are mutually exclusive, since pursuing happiness and comfort means insulating oneself from the ups and downs that make life interesting and fulfilling. Here, though, he fails to articulate what, exactly, "something more intelligent and great" looks like—he urges Alekhin to "Do good," but it's unclear what he means by this.

It's possible, then, that Ivan doesn't actually know what this "something" is—that is, what a meaningful life actually looks like. Indeed, just before this, Ivan all but admitted that he's wasted his own life. His "pitiful, pleading smile, as if he were asking personally for himself" is important, then: it makes the preceding quote read less like advice and more like Ivan chastising himself for his own wasted potential and wishing that he could do something important with what little time he has left. Alekhin, by contrast, seems both happy *and* fulfilled in his life as a farmer, which Ivan doesn't even acknowledge as a possibility. In this way, existential meaning seems to be much more complex and subjective than Ivan would like to think—and rather than coming off as a wise advisor to a younger man, he reads as embittered and pitiable.

Ivan Ivanych's story satisfied neither Burkin nor Alekhin. With the generals and ladies gazing from gilded frames, looking alive in the twilight, it was boring to hear a story about a wretched official who ate gooseberries. For some reason they would have preferred to speak and hear about fine people, about women. And the fact that they were sitting in a drawing room where everything—the covered chandelier, the armchairs, the carpets under their feet—said that here those very people now gazing from the frames had once walked, sat, drunk tea, and that the beautiful Pelageya now walked noiselessly here, was better than any story.

Related Characters: Nikolai Ivanych, Pelageya, Alekhin, Burkin, Ivan Ivanych

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 319

Explanation and Analysis

After Ivan finishes telling Burkin and Alekhin about his brother Nikolai (the "wretched official who ate gooseberries"), his friends are bored rather than inspired. The purpose of Ivan's story was to illustrate how greedy and contemptible Nikolai has become over the years, particularly now that he's achieved his dream of becoming a wealthy landowner. In doing so, Ivan wanted to inspire his friends to avoid becoming complacent the way he believes his brother has, and to embrace discomfort and suffering in order to live meaningfully. Burkin and Alekhin, however, "would have preferred to speak and hear about fine people, about women" and enjoy their evening in Alekhin's luxurious home. Clearly, Ivan has had the opposite effect on his friends than what he intended: rather than feeling inspired to eschew material comforts and prioritize meaning over happiness, Burkin and Alekhin seem put off by Ivan's bitterness and resentment toward Nikolai.

Indeed, the narration points out that the same people whose portraits hang in Alekhin's drawing room once sat in this same room drinking tea, just as the three friends are now—and that this fact is "better than any story." Based on Ivan's low opinion of wealthy, happy people, he would likely look down on the "fine people" in the portraits for their indulgence in frivolous luxuries ("the covered chandelier, the armchairs, the carpets under their feet"). Yet, rather hypocritically, he is enjoying the very same comforts, which suggests that his worldview—essentially, that money corrupts, and that happiness and existential meaning are incompatible—is misguided. Rather, wanting to be comfortable and happy may be a perfectly natural instinct. And given that Alekhin, for instance, seems comfortable, happy, *and* fulfilled, Ivan's theory of what makes life meaningful doesn't seem to be as universal as he thinks it is. The idea that generations of people have sat in this drawing room enjoying its comfort and beauty, and that this is "better than any story" Ivan could tell, suggests that simply enjoying life in this way *is* meaningful.

They were both put for the night in a big room with two old, carved wooden beds in it, and with an ivory crucifix in the corner. Their beds, wide and cool, made up by the beautiful Pelageya, smelled pleasantly of fresh linen.

Ivan Ivanych silently undressed and lay down. "Lord, forgive us sinners!" he said, and pulled the covers over his head.

His pipe, left on the table, smelled strongly of stale tobacco, and Burkin lay awake for a long time and still could not figure out where that heavy odor was coming from.

Rain beat on the windows all night.

Related Characters: Ivan Ivanych (speaker), Nikolai Ivanych, Alekhin, Pelageya, Burkin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 320

Explanation and Analysis

As Ivan and Burkin settle into their friend Alekhin's guest bedroom for the night, Ivan exclaims, "Lord, forgive us sinners!" before getting into bed. The crucifix in the bedroom implies that Alekhin is Christian, and he does seem to live by Judeo-Christian values: he does hard, honest work; he's kind and generous to his friends; and he's humble about his success. Yet Ivan's use of the pronoun "us" implies that he's talking about Alekhin and Burkin as well as himself, categorizing them all as sinners. This is likely because he recognizes that he and his friends, having sought shelter from a rainstorm in Alekhin's luxurious home, have all succumbed to the human (and, in Ivan's opinion, sinful) tendency to indulge in modern comforts and convenience.

Throughout the story, Ivan has railed against modern lifestyles—both urban and rural—because of the way they tend to insulate people from the suffering and chaos of the outside world, which is where he believes true meaning is found. Yet here, Ivan allows Alekhin's maid, Pelageya, to make up the room, and he doesn't resist settling into a warm bed that "smell[s] pleasantly of fresh linen" and sheltering himself from the rainstorm outside. This dissonance between what Ivan says and how he acts perhaps suggests that seeking comfort the way he does here is a normal human instinct—not an unforgivable sin, as Ivan seems to believe.

Meanwhile, from the other bed, Burkin notices that Ivan's pipe on the nightstand "smell[s] strongly of stale tobacco"—the odor keeps him awake while Ivan sleeps soundly. The stale smell emanating from Ivan's side of the room could be read as a symbol for Ivan himself. Just before this passage, Ivan spent a great deal of time criticizing his brother Nikolai and confessing to his friends how miserable he is in his old age. Burkin and Alekhin were bored by Ivan's stories and put off by his resentful attitude, and here, the stale tobacco smell seems to reflect the general staleness and unpleasantness that Ivan gives off. Rather than inspiring his friends to recognize their sins and live in a more meaningful and spiritually fulfilling way, Ivan comes off as a bitter and hypocritical old man, blissfully unaware of the effect he has on others.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

GOOSEBERRIES

On a bleak, cloudy day, veterinarian Ivan Ivanych and high school teacher Burkin are walking through vast fields outside the Russian village of Mironositskoe. Opposite the village, there are hills bordering a riverbank that stretch far into the distance. If one stands atop these hills in clear weather, one can see all of the surrounding scenery, a train that passes through the valley, and the town below. Ivan and Burkin are tired of walking, but they marvel at how beautiful the calm countryside is.

The opening passage focuses on a description of the lush scenery outside of Ivan and Burkin's Russian village, rather than any exposition about the two men themselves, which sets up nature as a focal point of the story. The town below the hills is notably set apart from the fields that surround it, which gives the impression that the people who live there are separated from nature—physically, and perhaps mentally, too. But Ivan and Burkin are voluntarily forgoing the city's modern comforts and instead immersing themselves in the outdoors, regardless of the dreary weather. Their contentment in this environment begins to suggest that insulating oneself from the elements may be comfortable, but it isn't necessarily conducive to happiness.

Burkin reminds Ivan that he was supposed to tell him a story the last time they met, so Ivan lights his pipe and prepares to tell Burkin the story about his brother—but just then, it starts to rain. The dogs the men have with them are soon wet and forlorn-looking, so Burkin suggests that they take cover at their friend Alekhin's home nearby, and Ivan agrees. They traipse through the fields until they reach Alekhin's estate, Sofyino, which features red barns, a garden, a "sparkling river," a large pond with a mill, and a bathing house. Everything looks dismal and unwelcoming in the rain, and as Ivan and Burkin approach Alekhin's barns, they feel uncomfortable in their wet clothes and mud-caked shoes.

Alekhin's large estate immediately signals that he's wealthy and successful—the "sparkling river" in particular connotes cleanliness and luxuriousness. Sofyino's many features offer a comfortable respite from the elements: whereas the fields and hills outside Mironositskoe represent untamed nature, Sofyino represents people's ability to exert control over their environment (through farming and gardening) as well as their ability to insulate themselves and their possessions from the occasional harshness of the outside world (in structures like the barns and the bathing house). In this way, Burkin and Ivan's decision to come to Sofyino suggests a conflict between their reverence for nature and their necessary desire to shield themselves from it.

Ivan and Burkin find Alekhin processing grain in one of the barns, "looking more like a professor or an artist than a landowner." He's wearing simple and dirty clothing and is covered head to toe in dust from the winnowing machine. Alekhin greets the men with a smile and instructs them to wait for him in the large main house. There, a young maid named Pelageya—whose beauty stuns Ivan and Burkin—invites the men inside, and Alekhin enters just after them. Alekhin tells Ivan and Burkin how happy he is to see them and invites them to wash up in the bathing house with him, so Pelageya brings the men some towels and soap.

Although Alekhin's estate indicates that he's quite well-off, he's doesn't look like a typical landowner: he seems "more like a professor or an artist," and his clothing is more characteristic of a peasant than a rich man. Right away, this signals that Alekhin is more modest than one might expect someone of his social class to be. The fact that he's doing manual labor (when he could presumably afford to hire employees to do this work) further shows that he's humble. In addition, his warm hospitality toward Ivan and Burkin indicates that he's kind, and generous. Meanwhile, Pelageya's beauty may seem like a passing detail, but it subtly hints at the importance of youth and vitality in the story. To Ivan and Burkin, at least, these are characteristics worth noticing and appreciating.

As the three friends undress in the bathing house, Alekhin tells Ivan and Burkin that he hasn't had time to bathe in months. While Alekhin and Burkin bathe inside, Ivan instead chooses to go out to the pond and swim in the rain, diving under the water and joyfully repeating "Ah, my God." He keeps swimming until Alekhin and Burkin emerge from the bathing house, already dressed, and Burkin beckons him back to the main house.

A bathing house would have been quite the luxury for someone in 19th-century Russia (where the story is set), as indoor plumbing was still a rarity in rural areas like this. The fact that Alekhin doesn't use this amenity further characterizes him as humble and unconcerned with social status or superficial appearances—he'd rather spend his time working hard than primping. Ivan, meanwhile, opts to enjoy the pond amid the rainstorm rather than join his friends in the bathing house, which once again highlights the ecstasy that one can find through direct connection to nature. Indeed, Ivan seems to take delight in experiencing nature in its rawest form and perhaps even in mild suffering (the rain and pond water are likely cold, after all), eschewing the modern comfort of the bathing house in favor of fully immersing himself in the elements. The experience could also be read as a kind of symbolic baptism for Ivan, as he dunks his head underwater repeatedly and utters, "Ah, my God," with a kind of religious awe. This seems to suggest that Ivan is trying to cleanse himself spiritually, and that connecting with nature in an authentic (and even uncomfortable) way is meaningful to him.

The three friends, now warm and cozy in their clean clothes, settle into drawing room. Pelageya serves them tea and fruit preserves while Ivan begins telling the story about his younger brother, Nikolai. While Ivan was studying to become a veterinarian, then-19-year-old Nikolai began working at a government office. The brothers' father, Chimsha-Himalaysky, was a military officer. After his death, the small estate where Ivan and Nikolai were raised was sold to pay off his debts—the boys had had an idyllic childhood on this land, frolicking in nature "like peasant children."

Again, although Ivan seems to be at his happiest when he's out in nature—weather notwithstanding—he also doesn't resist comforts like a warm house, clean clothing, and tea brought to him by a servant. This hints at a conflict within Ivan, and perhaps within all people, between a love of the natural world and a temptation to indulge in modern conveniences. The beginning of Ivan's story about Nikolai makes it clear that the brothers came from modest means and were raised to appreciate the outdoors "like peasant children" might—that is, without expensive comforts to distract from or dilute their experience of nature.

Ivan muses that once a person has experienced nature's beauty, they'll no longer feel at home in a town and will forever long to return to the countryside. This was certainly the case for Nikolai, who stagnated for years in his government office job, all the while daydreaming about moving to a modest country home near a lake or riverbank. Ivan never understood his brother's desire; in his view, relegating oneself to an isolated piece of land is no different than allocating six feet of earth to a corpse. He declares that the town is where "the struggle and noise of life" happens, and that moving away to a plot of land is self-centered, lazy, and spiritually deadening—one needs to experience the entire world to truly be free.

Ivan believes that nature must be experienced in its full scope, and in an unrestrained way. This seems to be why he disapproves of Nikolai's dream so vehemently, even though the brothers share a love of nature: Ivan thinks that limiting oneself to one confined, cultivated swath of land is an inauthentic way to experience the natural world. In his estimation, living on an estate is almost sinful—a curious opinion, given that Ivan led a happy childhood on a country estate, and that Alekhin (who's listening to this story) is a landowner himself. Ivan's comment that all of "the struggle and noise of life" happens in the city suggests that what's missing from the countryside is suffering—that is, the challenges and obstacles that make life meaningful and interesting. In Ivan's view, without "struggle and noise" to counterbalance easy happiness and comfort, one may as well be dead.

From his office, Nikolai would dream about growing and eating his own food and lounging outdoors. He loved to read agricultural books, almanacs, and newspaper advertisements of land for sale. Drawing inspiration from these materials, he'd imagine different features—gardens, birdhouses, ponds—for his own country home. These fantasies varied, but one element always remained the same: Nikolai knew that he wanted to grow **gooseberries** on his land. The plans he'd draw for his estate would always feature a master's house, servants' quarters, a kitchen garden, and gooseberry bushes.

Whereas Ivan believes that struggle and variety are what constitute a meaningful life, Nikolai places more importance on comfort, security, and aesthetic beauty. Nikolai's plans for his estate also hint at a preoccupation with wealth and status, since having enough money to employ servants is central to his vision. Most important, though, are the gooseberry bushes: it's unclear why Nikolai fixates on gooseberries specifically, but the ability to grow and eat them on his own land seems to symbolize his dream of a financially prosperous, peaceful, self-sufficient lifestyle. Nikolai's ideal relationship with nature—cultivating and shaping his environment rather than basking in its raw form—is Ivan's nightmare.

With this vision in mind, Nikolai lived frugally for decades, eating little and wearing threadbare clothes to save every penny he could. When he was in his forties, his job transferred him to a different province. Still focused on the country home with the **gooseberries**, Nikolai married an old, unattractive widow—whom he didn't love—simply because her previous husband had left her a modest sum. He remained stingy to keep saving as much money as possible, however, and his wife grew resentful of never having enough to eat. She died three years into their marriage, and Ivan reflects that Nikolai never thought to blame himself for her death.

Up until this point in Ivan's story, Nikolai's dream of becoming a landowner seemed innocent enough. Here, however, it becomes clear that he's a man obsessed: he'll embitter his own and other people's lives in order to accumulate wealth and build the estate of his dreams. In fact, Nikolai's behavior hints that he sees his future property primarily as a status symbol. It's unclear if the way Nikolai deprived his wife directly caused her death—but the fact that he took advantage of her for her money, treated her poorly, and didn't seem to care that she died is disturbing, regardless. In Nikolai's case, at least, a fixation on money seems to have a morally corrosive effect. Having witnessed all of this, it makes sense that Ivan detests people who are only focused on their own happiness and material wealth rather than trying to live morally and meaningfully.

Ivan points out that money, like alcohol, can have strange effects on people. He tells Burkin and Alekhin how once, when a merchant in his town was dying, the man covered all of his money and lottery tickets in honey and ate them so that no one else could have his riches. Another time, when Ivan was inspecting cows at the train station, one of the cattle dealers fell under a train and had his foot cut off. Ivan helped carry the dealer to the hospital, his wound pouring blood—and all the while, the man begged the others to find his amputated foot because he didn't want to lose the 20 rubles he kept in his boot.

The anecdotes Ivan shares in this passage are darkly humorous, highlighting the absurd lengths people will go to for money. The man who ate his riches—and particularly the man who was more concerned with 20 rubles (a few dollars in modern currency) than with his missing foot—are further examples of the maddening effect that money can have on a person. As a veterinarian, Ivan likely makes a decent living himself—but the difference between him and the men in his stories comes down to personal values and attitude. Even though Ivan has money, he doesn't center his life around it.

Returning to the story about his brother, Ivan recounts that after his wife's death, Nikolai began looking for an estate to buy. He ended up buying 300 acres of land with a master's house, servant quarters, and a park—but there were no **gooseberries**, and the river bordering the estate was contaminated with factory runoff. But this didn't bother Nikolai, who planted 20 gooseberry bushes and quickly settled into "living like a landowner."

Beyond literal aesthetic differences, the contrast between the polluted river by Nikolai's estate and the "sparkling river" by Alekhin's is also symbolic. It hints thatNikolai's success is inherently dirty and contaminated, like the polluted river, because he was only able to achieve his dream by becoming miserly, greedy, and cruel. Alekhin, on the other hand, is implied to have acquired Sofyino through honest means, and he certainly isn't money-hungry or status-obsessed—his morals, like his river, are pure and clean. Ivan's comment that Nikolai was "living like a landowner" is interesting, then, since it implies that all *landowners are the same.*

Last year, Ivan went to visit Nikolai at the estate, nicknamed Himalayskoe. The land was covered in thick brush and ditches, making it difficult for Ivan to get to the house. When the brothers reunited, Nikolai looked old and fat, and he and Ivan wept and embraced, depressed by the fact that they were both grey-haired and nearing death. When Nikolai showed Ivan around the estate, Ivan saw that his brother was living like "a real landowner, a squire"—Nikolai now ate well and bathed regularly. He made a big show of helping the local peasants, but he also took great offense whenever one of them failed to address him as "Your Honor."

Ivan and Nikolai's reaction to seeing each other—emotionally lamenting their old age—suggests that the brothers have a common interest in making the most of their lives. The difference is that Nikolai's path to fulfillment seems to rely on wealth and status—that is, ensuring that he has enough money and resources to insulate himself from suffering—whereas Ivan believes that a person needs to experience ups and downs to live meaningfully. Again, Ivan's observation that Nikolai was "like a real landowner, a squire" ignores the fact that not everyone in the landowning class is the same. After all, Alekhin's estate is much nicer than Nikolai's, meaning that he's even wealthier, yet he isn't lazy or arrogant like Nikolai is. It seems that the two men's attitudes *toward their prosperity is what sets them apart: Alekhin works hard for what he has and stays humble, while Nikolai demands respect from the lower classes without doing any of the work that would actually warrant respect.*

In Ivan's opinion, Nikolai's luxurious new lifestyle had made him insufferably conceited. While he used to be afraid of sharing his opinions, he now boldly stated his views on issues like education and corporal punishment, the way a government minister would. Nikolai spoke arrogantly about his influence over the peasants and continuously referred to himself as a nobleman—conveniently forgetting that their grandfather was a peasant and their father a soldier.

"Gooseberries" takes place in late 19th-century Russia, soon after Emperor Alexander II dissolved the country's centuries-old feudal system. Under feudalism, the peasant class was made up of serfs (indentured servants) whom landowners essentially treated like slaves. With this context in mind, it's understandable that Ivan finds Nikolai's attitude so distasteful: since the Ivanych brothers have peasant roots, it's likely that their ancestors (and perhaps even their living relatives) were serfs who suffered under the rule of landlords. This makes Nikolai's haughtiness, self-appointed noble status, and abuse of power over the local peasants particularly egregious. His transformation from frugal civil servant to entitled landowner certainly gives credence to Ivan's opinion that a such a sheltered, indulgent life is meaningless and spiritually corrupting.

On the evening of Ivan's visit, while he and Nikolai were having tea, the cook served them a plate of **gooseberries** that Nikolai had grown on his own bushes. Nikolai gobbled down the berries and raved about how delicious they were, but Ivan found them "tough and sour." Ivan pauses his story about his brother to quote the Russian author Alexander Pushkin, who said that people prefer their "exalted illusions"—their delusional fantasies—to the truth. Seeing Nikolai happy and fulfilled that night filled Ivan with despair; as he lay in bed, he heard Nikolai repeatedly getting up to eat more gooseberries.

For years, the ability to grow and eat his own gooseberries has symbolized the lifestyle Nikolai dreamed of, so the fact that he now has them represents his achievement of that dream. The fact that Nikolai finds the berries sweet, while Ivan finds them "tough and sour" thus represents the brothers' different opinions about Nikolai's success: while Nikolai seems happy and fulfilled on the surface, Ivan thinks that his brother is only deluding himself into happiness, just as he's deluding himself into thinking that the berries are sweet. Nikolai was, after all, only able to purchase Himalayskoe by depriving himself and his late wife for years. And now that he has the estate, the land isn't what he imagined (it's covered in brush and backs up against a polluted river), and Nikolai has become lazy, pompous, and cruel. For those reasons, Ivan thinks that Nikolai's success is tainted by the means he used to achieve it, as well as the kind of person that success has turned him into. But it's impossible for readers to know what the gooseberries actually *taste like, so it's unclear which of the brothers is really deluding themselves: Nikolai does seem genuinely happy, so it's possible that Ivan is the one imagining the "tough and sour" taste out of resentment.*

Ivan marvels aloud at how, when one is in public, it seems as though everyone is happy—but in private, many people are actually lazy, ignorant, poor, or degenerate. The horrible aspects of life happen behind closed doors, and Ivan thinks that this is the only way happy people can remain as such. He wishes that happy people could be continuously reminded of others' unhappiness—which they, too, will inevitably experience one day. But alas, happy people remain blissfully ignorant.

This aside hearkens back to Ivan's earlier comments about associating land ownership with selfishness and laziness. In his view, a comfortable and happy lifestyle like Nikolai's is only able to exist because his land and wealth insulate him from the suffering that goes on around him. This state of blissful ignorance may make for a happy life, but it doesn't make for a particularly meaningful or fulfilling one. After all, as Ivan points out, happiness is fleeting—it can be (and inevitably will be) easily disrupted by tragedy.

Returning to his story, Ivan tells Burkin and Alekhin that he recognized his own happiness that night too. Like Nikolai, Ivan would lecture others about proper living, religion, and politics—he'd say that education and freedom were necessary, but that achieving these things for everyone in society takes time. But now, looking angrily at Burkin, Ivan rhetorically questions this thinking—he demands to know who it is that's telling people to wait, and why people trust in the natural order of things when they could act instead.

Here, Ivan recognizes his own hypocrisy in acting as though he knows the key to a fulfilling life. Although he believes that people shouldn't aspire to happiness because it causes them to stagnate and miss out on life's meaningful ups and downs, he admits that he himself has fallen into this trap. Having condemned Nikolai for being happy at the cost of other people's unhappiness, Ivan recognizes that he, too, lectures people about bearing their suffering and waiting for their lives to improve, all the while enjoying the very privileges (such as education, freedom, and a decent standard of living) that others are denied.

Ivan says that he left Nikolai's house the next morning, and that from that point forward, he's found it unbearable to live in town—the peacefulness and the sight of happy people pain him. Ivan laments to Burkin and Alekhin that he's old and weak, and he's haunted by his own miserable thoughts. "If only I were young!" he exclaims twice.

Although Ivan previously characterized the city as the environment where "the struggle and noise of life" happens, here he admits that he now finds it just as oppressive as Nikolai's lifestyle. It seems he's recognized that both of these modern living situations—a house in town or an estate in the countryside—are equally manmade and artificial compared to being out in nature without any creature comforts. However, Ivan's reaction to other people's peace and happiness, combined with his exclamation, "If only I were young!" suggest that his distaste for modern lifestyles is rooted in resentment. Perhaps the reason why he disapproves of other people experiencing sustained comfort and happiness is because he's envious and feels that he's wasted his own life.


Suddenly, Ivan grasps Alekhin's hand and pleads with him to avoid settling down and becoming complacent when he's still young, strong, and capable of doing good. A happy life is one without purpose—meaning is found elsewhere, in "something more intelligent and great." "Do good!" Ivan exclaims.

Ivan's plea with Alekhin to "Do good!" again hints that Ivan is speaking out of resentment and fear that he squandered his own youth and potential. (This is perhaps why Ivan was so struck by Pelageya's youthful beauty earlier in the story—vitality is something Ivan clearly values and perhaps even covets.) But, contrary to Ivan's opinion, Alekhin's life does *seem meaningful as well as happy, at least to Alekhin himself. Notably, Ivan never defines what "something more intelligent and great" means—that is, what he believes is a superior path in life. And Ivan certainly doesn't seem more fulfilled than Alekhin despite positioning himself as a voice of reason and wisdom. Perhaps, then, a meaningful life is more subjective than Ivan would like to admit—just because he doesn't find Nikolai and Alekhin's lifestyles fulfilling doesn't mean that* they *don't.*

The three friends fall silent—Ivan's story bored Alekhin and Burkin. Something about the atmosphere of the drawing room, with its hung portraits of generals and ladies in gold-frames, is more suited to stories about "fine people" than one about an awful civil servant eating **gooseberries**. The people in those portraits once sat in this very room, drinking tea just as Ivan, Alekhin, and Burkin are being served by Pelageya now—and that fact alone is a better story than Ivan's tale about Nikolai.

The narration in this passage further suggests that Ivan's ranting about wealth and happiness is rooted in personal resentment rather than genuine wisdom about what makes life worth living. Instead of feeling inspired to eschew happiness and embrace suffering in order to find meaning, Alekhin and Burkin are bored by the story about Nikolai—they would rather hear about "fine people" achieving great things than focus on resenting what others have. It is, after all, somewhat hypocritical that Ivan is condemning wealthy, happy people and modern comforts, all the while luxuriating in a fancy drawing room and drinking tea served by a maid.

By this time, Alekhin is exhausted—farm work makes him an early riser—but he doesn't want to go to bed and miss Ivan and Burkin discussing something of interest. He doesn't know if anything Ivan has said is correct or particularly profound, but he doesn't want to end the conversation because it's unrelated to the practical concerns of his own life as a farmer.

As someone focused on the manual labor on his own land, Alekhin doesn't understand Ivan's concerns with pursuing a meaningful path. For Alekhin, life is straightforward: he fulfills his responsibilities on his farm, and he seems happy and content to focus on these practical matters. This perhaps suggests that rejecting comfort and happiness in favor of suffering and deliberately trying to find meaning is misguided. Instead, people might be better of following Alekhin's lead, simply pursuing what makes them happy and *gives them a sense of fulfillment. Moreover, this passage again shows that wealth doesn't necessarily make a person lazy or arrogant: both Nikolai and Alekhin are affluent landowners, yet Alekhin is notably down-to-earth. At the same time, Alekhin is interested in the potential of the conversation precisely because it isn't related to his practical concerns, so even he who seems mostly content has some sense of there being a part of life that he is missing out on.*

Burkin announces that it's time for bed, however, and he and Ivan go upstairs while Alekhin goes to his bedroom on the first floor. Pelageya makes up two beds with fresh-smelling linens for Ivan and Burkin in a guest room. In the corner of the room, there's an ivory crucifix. Leaving his pipe on the nightstand, Ivan says, "Lord, forgive us sinners," and goes to sleep in one of the beds. In the other bed, Burkin lays awake and wonders where the strong smell of stale tobacco is coming from. Rain beats down on the windows through the night.

The crucifix in the guestroom implies that Alekhin is religious to some degree, and it does seem like he lives his life according to Judeo-Christian principles like responsibility, integrity, and kindness. Yet Ivan's us of the pronoun "us" in his comment, "Lord forgive us sinners," seemingly lumps himself, Alekhin, and Burkin into the category of "sinner." It's unclear exactly what he means by this—but given how he's expressed his distaste for modern comforts throughout the story, it's likely that what he finds sinful is his and his friends' indulgence in comfort and convenience. Yet Ivan makes no effort to resist these things himself, allowing Pelageya to make his bed and settling in for a warm night, safely insulated from the rainstorm. This perhaps suggests that seeking out comfort and happiness is a natural human instinct—even someone like Ivan, who recognizes his own hypocrisy believes that he's a "sinner" for enjoying these things, can't help but find solace in them. Meanwhile, the scent of stale tobacco emanating from Ivan's bedside could be read as a subtle parallel to Ivan's own staleness and unpleasantness—something he himself is unaware of but that bothers others. Rather than being inspired by the story Ivan told and sympathizing with Ivan's tirade against Nikolai, Burkin was put off by Ivan's bitterness and resentment, just as he's repelled by the smell that now envelops his friend. Ultimately, "Gooseberries" is a story that portrays various ways of living—striving for wealth and status; enduring suffering; enjoying nature; focusing on practical matters—and never settles on any of them as obviously correct or right. The story captures the complexity and even the impossibility of the human search for fulfillment and happiness rather than easy answers about how to succeed in that search.


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