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Professor Diment
Honors 241: Russian Crime Fiction
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Question 1:

In Psychology, there is a distinction between sensation and perception. Sensations are what our senses take in, and perceptions are how the brain takes those sensations, processes them by relating them to previous experiences and expectations, and forms an interpretation of those sensations. This makes every person's view of reality unique, as the same or similar experiences can lead to very different perceptions. And so, perception is a great tool an author can use to convey ideas and stories. By showing reality through the lens of a character's perception, a reader can see an entirely different world. One of the best ways to show a character's perception is using the first-person narrative, and this technique can be especially useful in the genre of crime fiction. Great intro

Many of the crime fiction stories read in class were from the third person perspective, and so to start an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the first-person perspective, I will contrast it with the third person perspective. Three dimensions in which to compare the two perspectives are plot, development of secondary characters, and perception, with a special focus on how Nabokov uses perception in the first-person to make *Despair* such a suspenseful and intriguing story.

Starting with plot, the third person perspective generally allows for a more complex plot, as a narrator can move from person to person, following them as they go. For example, in *Crime*

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and Punishment, although the main plot of the story is driven by Raskolnikov and his struggles with the psychological aftermath of his murders, towards the latter half of the book the narration follows the ark of Svidrigaylov and his eventual death. This allows for an author using the third person perspective to weave storylines together for a more complex plot as the reader can see various characters' actions and how they might interact. Meanwhile, since the first-person perspective is limited to only one character's point of view, it can be harder to create a complex plot without confusing the reader. For example, in Nabokov's *Despair*, since the story is told from the first-person perspective, the plot is less complex with generally fewer characters, although one could also argue that keeping the plot simple helps keep the focus where it should be, on Herman.

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The second dimension through which to contrast these two perspectives is secondary character development. One good place to start this comparison leads off from the previous point about being able to weave multiple plot points together using the third person perspective. In the third person perspective, since the author can more readily weave plotlines, they can follow multiple characters and thus the author has a greater ability to add more depth to the side characters in their stories. Additionally, this allows for an extra layer of complexity for the reader to try and understand as the more fleshed outside secondary characters provide contrast and a point of reference in a third person narration. An example of this contrast can be seen in "Queen of Spades" between Herman and Lizaveta. With the third person narration, the reader learns about the lives of both Herman and Lizaveta, and thus can come to understand both of their motivations and why, perhaps, Lizaveta may be considered an accomplice of Herman. Meanwhile, in the first person, this type of development of side characters becomes more difficult. It becomes hard to show rather than explicitly state side characters' motives. For

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example, in Nabokov's *Despair*, Nabokov needs to provide a reason as to why Felix would insist on meeting up with Herman once more after their initial meeting. To show Felix's state of mind, Nabokov does so in a series of letters. However, since he was limited to the first-person perspective, Felix's motive has to be more explicitly stated to the reader: "It was plain now why he wrote to me at all. The memory of that one-thousand-mark note…" (Nabokov 119). And so, the reader does not learn as much about side characters, and thus it can be harder to contrast the main character's actions and motives with those of other characters, thereby losing one of the tools available to an author writing from the third person perspective.

However, just because it may be more difficult to have complex plots or to flesh out secondary characters does not mean that the first-person perspective cannot be a great choice for crime fiction. I would argue that one of the major advantages of the first-person perspective that Nabokov takes advantage of, perception, is what ultimately makes *Despair* such a suspenseful and enticing novel.

To start the analysis of perception, consider how Dostoevsky portrays Raskolnikov's view of the world. When observing Raskolnikov carry out the murders in *Crime and Punishment*, a reader at first sees only the gruesome action, and after the fact Dostoevsky spends the rest of the story showing Raskolnikov's perception of the world through his essays, talks with Sonya, etc, which led him to that moment. However, in *Despair*, Nabokov, through his use of the first-person perspective, allows the reader to see Herman's perception of the world through Herman himself. Therefore, no explanations or justifications are needed. The reader sees exactly what Herman is seeing, and therefore has to make their own judgement on his actions considering his perception of the world. Being forced to constantly try and judge Herman's actions through his perception maintains the reader's suspense and interest in Herman.

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One of the first judgements a reader must make of Herman is whether to believe him or not. This judgement is brought to the reader's attention by the fact that Herman himself perceives the world and truth as malleable: "I composed abstruse verse and elaborate stories… Not a day passed without my telling some lie. I lied as a nightingale sings…" (Nabokov 45). These types of statements create a certain paradox for the reader: Is Herman to be trusted, in that he tells the truth about the fact that he lies? And so, this is the first example of Nabokov's use of perception to enhance intrigue in Herman. By showing how Herman perceives the world through stories and lies, the reader is forced to grapple with the fact that the very story they may be reading might be a complete illusion. Additionally, Nabokov creates the story in such a way that Herman does not just tells the reader that he is a liar, he demonstrates it multiple times throughout the story. When trying to trick Felix into working for him, at one point Felix seems unconvinced, to which Herman responds by denying that he is lying: "said Felix, 'it is unkind of you to pull a poor man's leg… I'm afraid there is a slight misunderstanding,' I said softly" (Nabokov 87). Then, later, when convincing Lydia of his ploy, he seems to toy with her by bringing up the fact that he might be lying: "'Imagine, Lydia'" said I, sitting on the table and dangling my legs, ''imagine that all I'm telling you is fiction'" (Nabokov 143). In both of these examples, Herman tells wild story and tries to convince others that he is not lying, so why would Herman distinctly tell the reader towards the beginning of the story that he is a liar?

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This question leads naturally to the next tool Nabokov uses the first-person perspective for to enhance intrigue in his story: breaking the fourth wall. By addressing the reader directly, it feels as though the reader is playing a game with Herman. The lies are, in a sense, just a part of this game. Herman himself acknowledges the reader multiple times throughout the story, specifically referencing how the reader must figure out the novel: "too full of libelous assertion,

the absurdity of which will be easily seen by the same attentive reader" (Nabokov 207). This sort of meta-perception, Herman's perception of knowing that the reader will be reading his novel on his perception of the world, adds another greater layer of intrigue. One of the best examples of this meta-perception can be seen in the fake ending Herman proposes. After at length describing how Herman had gotten away with the murder, he then seemingly turns to the reader and says, "Do you feel the tang of this epilogue? I have concocted it according to a classic recipe…poking sly fun at life's conservativeness," (Nabokov 179), almost as if he is poking fun at the reader who may have believed this fake ending. Thereby, the reader maintains interest in Herman by having to constantly guess at his lies and by trying to figure out if Herman is lying in the story, or due to his meta-perception, lying directly to the reader.

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However, Herman is by no mean omniscient, and another way in which Nabokov maintains suspense in the story is by having Herman's perception of the world clash with "reality" (one may argue that, if Herman has made up this whole story that there is no "reality," but I will not focus on that question here). Some examples of Herman's misconceptions of the world are presented rather early in the story. For example, at the beginning Herman states how his wife "loved me without reservations, without retrospection… Yes, she loved me, loved me faithfully~~,~~" (Nabokov 29)., yet he walks in on Lydia cheating on him with Ardalion when he sees her "On Ardalion's bed, half dressed~~,~~" (Nabokov 104)., and Ardalion with only a painter's smock under which "was nothing beneath save his silver cross…" (Nabokov 106). This shows the major strength of perception in the first person as the reader can see the objective "reality" here - that Herman's wife is probably cheating on him - while simultaneously seeing the world through Herman's perception and understanding that he does not fully understand, or want to understand, what is going on. This creates suspense as the reader gets the feeling that there is something off

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with Herman. However, some of the most subtle clashes of Herman's perceptions with reality are only made evident towards the end of the novel. Two of the most striking examples are Felix not looking like Herman at all and Orlovius being completely aware of Herman's madness the whole time. Starting with Orlovius, at times throughout the novel, he hinted about the fact that he was worried about Herman's mental state such as when first inquiring if he is "'Not very well?'" (Nabokov 132) and then hinting at Herman's insanity "Orlovius explained to me, with copious details, the danger lunatics present to the community…" (Nabokov 132-133) after Herman presents him with the "black mail" he had received. Reality then clashes with how Herman presents Orlovius as a thick, unobservant person whom he can easily manipulate, as at the end of the novel it is revealed that Orlovius and others believed that Herman was not quite sane all along, noting how Herman "used to write letter to myself [Herman]" (Nabokov 191). In a similar manner, there are clues throughout the story that Herman and Felix do not look alike. For example, when Herman sees Felix's picture in the newspaper: "Oddly enough, his pictured face did not resemble mine closely; it could, of course, easily pass for my photo…" (Nabokov 173). However, it is only at the end of the novel ~~when Herman~~ that it is made clear to the reader that indeed Herman's perception of the world is twisted: "Now it dawned upon me what had shocked me most – shocked me as an insult: not a word was there about our resemblance" (Nabokov 186). This accumulation of evidence of Herman's misconceptions of reality makes the story suspenseful as it keeps the reader guessing about what kind of errors Herman has made in his mind and what consequences they will bring.

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And so, through his use of perception and the first person, Nabokov has created a story that does not need a complex plot or deep secondary characters to which Herman can be compared. All the suspense and intrigue necessary for the novel can be found by the reader in

trying to play the game of lies and half-truths with Herman. By presenting the world through Herman's eyes, Nabokov creates a story which simply must be reread so that the reader can try and pick up on those subtle clues, trying to separate "reality" from Herman's perceptions of it.

Excellent! Like how detailed and sophisticated it. You really follow the dynamic in the novel between perception and reality very nicely. A pleasure to read! 40

Question 2:

Axes, Swedish matches, a leather blotter, bombs, some of these items are from the authentic Russian 19th century crime literature and others are from Boris Akunin's *The Winter Queen*, a novel written by Akunin in the 20th century but staged in the 19th. As such, Akunin's historical fiction has elements from those older works, while also incorporating different elements which reflect the time in which he was writing the novel. By comparing the work of the detectives, the nature of crimes, and the role women play on both sides of the law in Akunin's novel to the works from the 19th century, it can be seen how Akunin takes some classic elements from 19th century literature into his work, but also adds his own, more modern, twists.

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The role of detectives in the 19th century works read in class varied quite a bit. Some of the stories such as "Queen of Spades" and "The Murder" barely mention them at all, while in *Crime and Punishment* and "The Swedish Match" detectives play a pivotal role. However, only in "The Swedish Match" is the main character a detective. Therefore, the clearest comparison comes with Chekhov's work. In both stories, there are direct references to deductive reasoning: "'What powers of deduction! Just look at him!" Tchubikov jeered," (Chekhov 2) and "It's the deductive method, my dear Fandorin. Building up the overall picture from a few small details" (Akunin 72). This type of deductive reasoning is used in both novels to drive the plot forward. In "The Swedish Match," Dyukovksy slowly rebuilds the scene of the murder from little bits of cloth in the bushes, pools of blood, a discarded boot, and, of course, a Swedish Match, all of which leads him to question various characters. Meanwhile, although Fandorin did not tend to do this type of crime scene analysis, he still uses deductive reasoning to figure out his next move.

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One example of this occurs when the chief is trying to ascertain who might have been the Azazel agent who killed Akhtyrtsev, he comes up with "'These circles at the top are the four scenarios. The first circle, as you see…,'" (Akunin 76), and Fandorin goes on to explore many of those different scenarios, such as his episode with Count Zurov, and he also adds his own scenario that Lady Astair could be behind it all using his deductive reasoning. Additionally, this type of deductive reasoning helps Fandorin out in the field with perhaps the closest homage to "The Swedish Match" occurring when Fandorin obsesses that the leather blotter mentioned in the suicide letter must be important. Another way in which Chekhov and Akunin's works are similar is in their use of parody and poking fun at aspects of the traditional "Police Procedural" story. This manifests itself in Chekhov's work through his twist at the end when the two detectives find that Mark Ivanitch is not dead at all, but simply hiding out in the superintendent's house. And so, all of Dyukovksy's logical leaps and deductions are put into a quite humorous and ironic light by this discovery. Akunin likewise pokes similar fun at the "Police Procedural" through Fandorin's futile attempts at disguise. Multiple times throughout the story, Fandorin believes himself to be clever in his disguise, only to have it made obvious to the reader that it has not worked at all. Two humorous examples of this occur when Fandorin realizes he has used a mustache in vain, "'The description matched perfectly; even your guess about the mustache was correct.'… Fandorin tore off his ignominious, useless mustache…" (Akunin 124) and when he dresses up as an artist to hide from the Azazel after nearly escaping death in England, only to have the shopkeeper wonder if he was a murder due to his lackluster disguise: "Him an artist, but never a sign of any paints or canvases in the place! Maybe he's some murderer or other…" (Akunin 131).

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Although Akunin handles the work of detectives in his novel with these similarities to the 19th century literature, there are also some stark contrasts. One of these contrasts can be seen in the treatment of the deductive reasoning. While Dyukovksy's superior Tchubikov is quite skeptical of the leaps of Dyukovksy's deductive reasoning in "The Swedish Match," Fandorin's superior Brilling even encourages him to come up with grander and grander theories: "Better to say something stupid than miss something important" (Akunin 79). Additionally, Fandorin's suspicions are often proven correct, which naturally follows to the main difference between Akunin's novel and the 19th century novels with respect to detective work: everything tends to be flashier. From daring police operations, "we carried out an operation, but it didn't go entirely smoothly (Akunin 177), to carriage chase scenes "'Quick, follow that carriage!'" (Akunin 45), to stealthy snooping work "Like a black shadow Erast Fandorin dashed across to the wall and gave the drainpipe a shake," (Akunin 123) Fandorin's work is full of suspense and action which puts him in harm's way. Meanwhile, compare this to ~~Dyukovksy's~~ Dyukovsky's or Porfiry's work in *Crime and Punishment*. Neither of these character's lives are ever put in danger, and their work is generally just to interview various people and do paperwork. Thus, the main contrast between the work of detectives in the 19th century novels and Fandorin's characters is in the flashiness of their methods. Good comparison

Another way in which flashiness and grandeur separates Akunin's novels from the 19th century works is the nature of crimes. In the nineteenth century novels, the crimes, although perhaps graphic, were often fairly mundane in their classification. In *Crime and Punishment,* "The Murder," and "Queen of Spades," each of these stories only has one or two murders around which the story centers. Meanwhile, in Akunin's novel, people drop left and right from Liza to Akhtyrtsev. However, it is not just the frequency of murders that adds to the flashiness of

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Akunin's novel, it is also the motive behind the crimes. While Dostoevsky and Chekhov focus on the psychology and inner thoughts of the murderer to try and explain the killings in *Crime and Punishment* and "The Murder" respectively, Akunin builds up a grand conspiracy spanning international borders: "Azazel acts aggressively, killing without hesitation. There is clearly some global purpose involved" (Akunin 194). Additionally, while all the other works read in class in the 19th century center around Russia alone, Fandorin travels across Europe to England and his detective work leads him to converse with various Russian embassies around the world, thus demonstrating how the criminals in Akunin's work are much more international and complex than those "villains" in the earlier 19th century works. This type of global, international conspiracy fits the time period in which Akunin was writing after the fall of the Soviet Union much more than it fits in with the more classic Russian Crime Fiction.

However, although the crimes may be more frequent and the criminal networks span many continents, there are a few threads that connects the nature of crimes in Akunin's novel to some of the earlier works of Crime Fiction: motive and religion. The similarities between Raskolnikov's motives and Lady Astair's are quite striking. Raskolnikov justifies his murders at first by explaining how one could "Kill her, take her money, on condition that you dedicate yourself with its help to the service of humanity" (Dostoevsky 56) while Lady Astair justifies the crimes of the Azazel with a similar appeal to the greater good: "'one cannot clean out the Augean stables without soiling one's hands. One man's life saves thousands, millions of other people'" (Akunin 214). Additionally, accompanying both of these motivations is another theme: twisted religion. In Raskolnikov's case, his beliefs start to line up with those of a nihilist, saying at one point in response to Sonya's belief that God would protect her family, "'Perhaps God does not exist,' answered Raskolnikov, with malicious enjoyment" (Dostoevsky 271).~~"~~ Likewise,

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Lady Astair believes Azazel, a demon, to be "a great symbol of the savior and enlightener of mankind" (Akunin 229) and she often invokes religion to further justify her actions. This theme of twisted religion is also quite similar to Yakov in "The Murder," and how he was led to kill by his belief in the old religion. An excellent point

The final point of comparison between the 19th century novels and Akunin's 20th century work is the role that women play on both sides of the law. One of the most prominent references to the 19th century literature in Akunin's novel is his use of a "Poor Liza" in his novel. However, "Poor Liza's" end in *The Winter Queen* is much more dramatic than the likes of Lizaveta in "The Queen of Spades," once again showing how Akunin uses 19th century themes while dramatizing them for the modern era. This mixture of modern themes with 19th century references occurs quite often throughout *The Winter Queen*. Another example can be found in comparing Akulka from "The Swedish Match" to Amalia Bezhetskaya. Both could be considered, in a sense, "femme fatale" as many different men fall in love with Akulka and Amalia. However, in "The Swedish Match," ~~Dyukovksy~~ Dyukovsky essentially makes her a scapegoat: 'It's all on account of Akulka, on account of a woman…" (Chekhov 4) while Amalia Bezhetskaya is seen as a powerful manipulator: "The main thing is – you can sense an immense power in her. A power so strong that she seems to be toying with everyone" (Akunin 74). Thus, even though Akunin and Amalia may fall into the same "femme fatale" stereotype, Akunin presents Amalia as a more modern, powerful woman while Akulka is presented simply as a promiscuous figure. This idea of powerful women contrasting with the women in the 19th century works can be seen by comparing Lady Astair to some of the women in *Crime and Punishment*. While the women in *Crime and Punishment* generally do not drive the plot line on their own and are instead either there to support the men of the story (Ex. Sonya) or are being chased by men (Ex. Svidrigaylov

and Dunya), Lady Astair is a powerful woman with her own motivation and goals: “I [Astair] also realized that God had given me the strength to do more than save a handful of orphans. I could save mankind” (Akunin 213). And thus, Akunin’s women contrast with the 19th century women in that they wield power and drive the plot forward on their own as opposed to largely playing a supporting role to the men in the story.

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And so, from a comparison of these three different themes, the work of the detectives, the nature of crimes, and the role women play on both sides of the law, one can see how Akunin’s work has been based on many similar themes and ideas as the 19th century literature, while also adding his own, more modern flair to *The Winter Queen*.

Also an excellent response – detailed, nuanced; good comparisons and contrasts. The works! 40

Question 3:

The collapse of the Soviet Union resounded around the world. It was a time of great political and civil unrest for the former Soviet nations and the dark sentiment of Chernukha that had started in the late 1980s continued to preside over many of these new nations. Ukraine was one of those nations that found itself in the grip of Chernukha after the collapse, and the sentiment affected many different aspects of daily life, including literature. Chernukha's ~~e~~affect and the greater historical backdrop influence~~d~~s ?many of the struggles found in Andrey Kurkov's *Death and the Penguin* through his use of references to the deterioration of Ukrainian institutions and the general pessimism and hopelessness faced by various characters in the novel.

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Kurkov incorporates many institutions from Ukraine into his story which relays a sense of realism while also demonstrating the deteriorating state of Ukraine at the time. The most obvious place to start would be with Misha. By combining the landmark of the Kiev zoo with the fictional penguin Misha, Kurkov highlights how even an everyday, ordinary institution, like a zoo, is falling apart at the seams. An example of this slow deterioration can be seen when Viktor is looking for a Penguinologist, and in his visit to the "Information Centre," the woman there asks if he could "do with the odd snake? Reptiles and amphibians go from January" (Kurkov 55). In fact, Kurkov uses the imagery of changing institutions multiple times to further relay the sense of change and deterioration: "Just beyond the former Lenin Museum he stopped and gazed around… the ruins of the Philharmonic Hall, a hoarding graphically awash with French shampoo: *Your Hair – The Envy of All*!" (Kurkov 183). This quote provides a stark visual of how Ukraine is changing. The Lenin museum references Ukraine's past as a former Soviet Nation, the

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crumbling Philharmonic hall perhaps referencing the deterioration of present-day Ukraine through its "Economic Chernukha," and last the advertisement representing the incoming wave of Capitalism from the West. Another way in which Ukraine's deteriorating institutions can be seen is the involvement of the gangs, and by extension Viktor, in taking down various "notables." Often, Viktor's obituary "hit lists" target member from important institutions, showing how even the powerful cannot escape. One example of this is Yakornitsky, one of Viktor's first subjects. Misha non-penguin puts it best when describing Yakornitsky's inability to escape death, saying "It's a tough life they lead at the top…A kind of war," (Kurkov 49). And so, through his references to various institutions that are deteriorating either through lack of funds or gang violence, Kurkov demonstrates the current struggles of Ukraine on a broad, institutional level.

Ukraine's plight as a nation also manifests itself in Kurkov's story through the struggles of individual characters as well. One of the most pertinent examples of this struggle is found in the story of the Penguinologist, Pidpaly. Pidpaly's story is an apt example of the pessimism that characterizes Chernukha. The first thing the reader learns about Pidpaly is that he has lost his job at the zoo, a greater reflectance of the economic disparity of the times. Then, in return for his Penguin manuscripts, Pidpaly simply asks for food, another sign of his struggles. However, the true suffering of Pidpaly can be seen when he becomes ill. It becomes apparent in many ways that no one else cares about Pidpaly, and that only Viktor, essentially a stranger, seems to care for him. This total lack of empathy towards Pidpaly can be seen through his treatment by the medical system. First, the paramedics do not want to take Pidpaly to the hospital unless Viktor pays them – "The paramedic dithered, looked again at the old man, as if gauging his value" (Kurkov 102) – and then the doctors is only willing to help him in return for his flat – "Give my

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flat over to him and he'll give me another three month" (Kurkov 110). This complete apathy towards Pidpaly and measuring his life's worth based on what he can give in return contains the marked aspect of pessimism present in Chernukha. Viktor, just like the reader, grows angry at Pidpaly's treatment, but ultimately can do nothing more than pay for him. This sense of frustration and anger at the poor treatment of Pidpaly is reflective of the times, and Pidpaly's acceptance of his death and his pessimistic end also fits the mold of Chernukha.

Another character whose plight is reflective of the general Chernukha of the times is Sonya. Sonya suddenly appears in Viktor's life, with nothing more than a note from Misha-non-penguin, however throughout the course of the novel Viktor seems to build a family-like collection of people around her – an idea which is not lost on Viktor himself. Kurkov portrays many heartwarming moments throughout the story of an almost idyllic family life. At the dacha, Kurkov portrays them like a family on a vacation with heartwarming descriptions such as "Ash glowed in the hearth. Sonya was sleeping and smiling" (Kurkov 84). Then, when Sergey moves away and Nina is brought in, the traditional quasi family is complete. And so, through this development of a family, the reader begins to feel hope that perhaps Sonya will be able to have a stable family. Nina begins to spend more time with them, and Viktor begins to become more open to the idea: "Was it then simply a protracted *we're-a-family* game? Maybe… Perhaps he should try to grow fond of Nina and Sonya, get them to respond, so that their strange union became that of a genuine family" (Kurkov 195). However, this whole grand illusion becomes shattered when Viktor realizes that his life is in danger, and he leaves Sonya a message almost exactly the same as the one her father left her. And so, the reader is presented with the pessimistic reality of family life for the young girl Sonya, who, through no fault of her own, is stuck in a vicious cycle of gang related loss of family.

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And so, by examining these characters and themes, one can see how the context in which Kurkov wrote this novel greatly influenced his work *Death and the Penguin*. The general pessimism of the novel is reflective of the Chernukha of the time, and manifests itself in Kurkov's depictions of Ukrainian institutions, characters such as Pidpaly for whom no one cares and whose life is measure by dollars, and the plight of Sonya, whose family life is broken time and again, seemingly in the exact same way.

Great – 20

A terrific exam – very thoughtful, interesting, wonderfully detailed and analytical. A real pleasure to read! 100. 4.0 (A+) COURSE 4.0