

Brief Introduction to Literary Analysis via Daniil Kharms - Lesson Plan

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This lesson is to provide a quick overview of how students can approach literary analysis. This can be framed as an example of how they can generate ideas for writing a paper on a work of literature. It is a class-wide activity with students writing their own portions and then sharing with the class. This lesson focuses on using a brief work of literature by Daniil Kharms, a master of Russian absurdism. The benefits of this are that it is short enough to read the entire work together in only a few moments, but it is such an enigmatic work that students will go through a process of discovery as they develop their own literary analyses. This lesson could easily be adapted to use flash fiction or poetry of a similar length with the same goal of walking students through an example of developing their own literary analyses in one single class session.

1. As a class, read together the short work "Blue Notebook #10" by Daniil Kharms (the entire *Blue Notebook* is available for free by Ugly Duckling Presse: https://issuu.com/uglyducklingpresse/docs/blue_notebook)

BLUE NOTEBOOK #10

by Daniil Kharms

There was a redheaded man who had no eyes or ears. He didn't have hair either, so he was called a redhead arbitrarily.

He couldn't talk because he had no mouth. He didn't have a nose either.

He didn't even have arms or legs. He had no stomach, he had no back, no spine, and he didn't have any insides at all. There was nothing! So, we don't even know who we're talking about.

We'd better not talk about him any more.

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Kharms, Daniil. *The Blue Notebook*, Translated by Matvei Yankelevich, e-book, Ugly Duckling Presse, 2005.

2. Explain to the students that after they read a work of literature, they should first attempt to understand it on its own terms. Empathize with them that the story is odd but that is all the more reason for them to brainstorm what this short work could mean. Does it tell a story? Does it have characters? Is there a message they think the author is trying to get across? What sorts of topics or ideas does the story bring to mind?

3. The next step in analyzing literature is to understand the context in which an author is writing. Students should learn about authors' lives and what was occurring in history during the times they were writing. Have the students learn a bit about Kharm's life and the Russian history up to and during World War II that was affecting him. A brief biography is available here: "Daniil Kharm's." *New World Encyclopedia*. 16 Nov. 2017, <https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Daniil_Kharm's>. Accessed 21 August 2019.

After reading this, how does it help the students to better understand Kharm's writing? Can they relate this to censorship, secret police, or living in fear of a totalitarian government? Did they change their perspective of the story based on this information?

4. Finally, students should do research to learn how professional scholars have interpreted this work of literature. Students should see how they can build a thesis statement to make a point about the work of literature that builds on what scholars have already written. The following excerpt from "The Rudiments of Daniil Kharm's: In Further Pursuit of the Red-Haired Man" by Neil Cornwell published in *The Modern Language Review* provides an overview of how scholars have interpreted this work. This can approximate the process of researching a work of literature.

[p. 140]

This startling miniature has already attracted considerable critical comment and established itself as something of an archetypal Kharm's mini-story, non-story, or anti-story. Ann Shukman observes that the story is a 'stream of words [...], making sense grammatically and syntactically, but increasingly detached from any reality in any possible world', in that the identity, or reality, of the topic of discourse is broken, in defiance of normal rules of communication.[26] It can be read as a parody of narration, destroying itself as a story as it goes along, as Jaccard has pointed out.[27] Its motif of losing parts of the body links it to Gogol's *Nos* ('The Nose'); as Robin Aizlewood has noted, 'it can also be read non-parodically if viewed against the situation of the times', which can be seen to be of importance for the *Incidents* cycle as a whole, but also in terms of lack, or absence, and a 'divorce between signifier and signified', which brings us back to Jakobsonian codes of communication and Kharm's breaches thereof. Aizlewood, interestingly enough, goes on to speak of restoring, or even resurrecting, the red-haired man (by a process of reversability in communication codes) ('Towards an Interpretation', pp. 102, 103, 105). Many of these, and similar, points are elaborated and reinforced in a substantial discussion of this text by Neil Carrick,[28] who characterizes Kharm's absurdist prose as 'a negative art', yet is able to discern 'spiritual salvation' (p. 622) of a sort in 'Blue Notebook No. 10', as well as a lingering 'uncanny sense of plot' (p. 624).[29] He argues that 'Kharm employs scepticism and negation to reveal the transcendence of the human spirit in the face of existential chaos' (p. 622). Carrick thus sees this text as, in a certain sense at least, 'primarily religious' and relates it to the 'medieval philosophical tradition known as "Negative Theology", which sought to affirm the existence of God by emphasizing his pervasive absence' (p. 623). It may also be remembered that the Russian word *gyzhii*, [*ryzhii chelovek* means "red-haired man" in Russian] used as a noun, means 'circus clown' and that the implications of such a connotation

could give rise to yet another pursuit, as an alternative to what follows, into possible worlds of circus symbolism and carnivalization. Without here and now, however, pursuing the red-haired man further into all such realms of meaning, identity, and the beyond, it remains still feasible to pursue him intertextually. As it happens, in this sense at least, he might not be quite as rare a phenomenon as is commonly assumed. Given Kharms's predilection for posing as Sherlock Holmes, an obvious first port of call in any quest for the *ryzhii chelovek*'s possible antecedents is the early story from *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1892), 'The Red-Headed League'.^[30]

26 Ann Shukman, 'Towards a Poetics of the Absurd: The Prose Writings of Daniil Kharms', in *Discontinuous Discourses in Modern Russian Literature*, ed. by Catriona Kelly and others (Basingstoke and London, Macmillan, 1989), pp. 60-72 (p. 61).

27 Jean-Philippe Jaccard, 'Daniil Kharms in the Context of Russian and European Literature of the Absurd', in *Daniil Kharms and the Poetics of the Absurd* (1999), pp. 49-70.

28 'Daniil Kharms and the Art of Negation', *Slavonic and East European Review*, 72 (1994), 622-43.

29 Carrick also points out (p. 625, n. 7) that 'in the original Golubaia tetrad', the text bears no title and is merely designated by the number ten. All other entries are similarly marked by numbers. Thus when Kharms copied this story into his *Sluchai* notebook, he specifically gave it the (non) title "Golubaia tetrad' No. 10". No doubt in view of this incongruous sounding non-title, the story has frequently (if, strictly speaking, erroneously) been tagged 'The Red-Haired Man' (e.g. by Shukman, p. 61).

30 See Minushee, I I, p. 498: 'At one time I did the Indian pose, then Sherlock Holmes, then yoga, and now it's the irritable neurasthenic.' The Holmes pose is born out by various self-portraits and photographs (see, for instance, the illustrations to *Polet v nebesa*, pp. 220, 313) and by the recollections of various memoirists.

Cornwell, Neil. "The Rudiments of Daniil Kharms: In Further Pursuit of the Red-Haired Man." *The Modern Language Review*, vol. 93, no. 1, 1998, pp. 133–145. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3733629.

5. Students will likely be surprised to see what complex and detailed observations scholars have written on such a short work of literature. You can use any insights students have gained from the scholarly writing to have an overall discussion on Kharms' "Blue Notebook #10." You can transition this discussion to explain how students can use this same basic process with to develop a literary analysis for any work of literature.