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Chapter One

A Grain as Big as a Hen's Egg

Leo Tolstoy

Speaking Strategy: Intonation Pattern in the Sentence

Literary Element: Plot

A. Pre-reading Activities

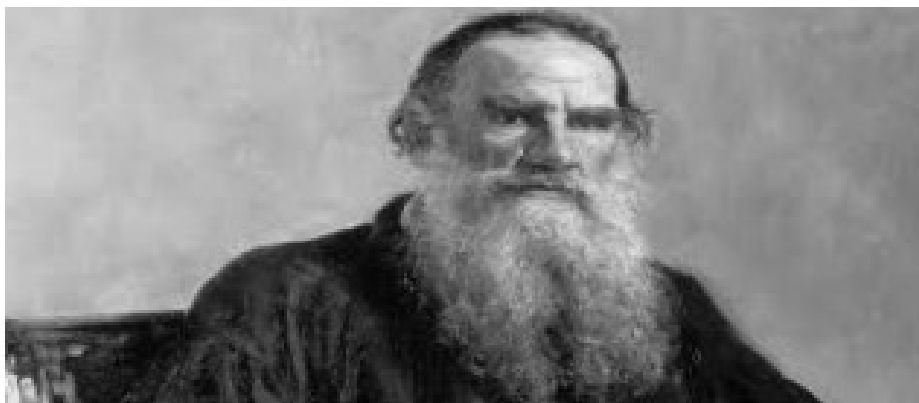
A1. Think a moment

Express your idea and experience with regard to the following quote:

The end of labor is to gain leisure.

Aristotle

A2. Meet the author



Leo Tolstoy

On September 9, 1828, Leo Tolstoy was born in Tula Province, Russia. In the 1860s, he wrote his first great novel, War and Peace. In 1873, Tolstoy set to work on the second of his best known novels, Anna Karenina. He continued to write fiction throughout the 1880s and 1890s.

Birth: September 9, 1828

Death: November 20, 1910

Nationality: Russian

Occupation: Novelist, short story writer, playwright, essayist

Literary movement: Realism

A3. Vocabulary review

Study the following words and collocations before reading the story:

- **Bent (adj):** unable to stand straight
- **Cease (v):** stop
- **Hard of hearing (col):** unable to hear very well
- **Live on (col):** to eat a lot of a particular type of food
- **Make head or tail of something (col):** understand something
- **Manage (v):** be able to do something
- **Ponder (v):** think about
- **Learned (adj):** knowledgeable
- **Yield (v):** produce

B. Reading

One day some children found, in a *ravine*¹, a thing shaped like a grain of corn, with a *groove*² down the middle, but as large as a hen's egg. A traveler passing by saw the thing, bought it from the children for a penny, and taking it to town, sold it to the King as a curiosity. The King called together his wise men, and told them to find out what the thing was. The wise men pondered and pondered and could not make head or tail of it, till one day, when the thing was lying on a window-sill, a hen flew in and pecked at it till she made a hole in it, and then everyone saw that it was a grain of corn. The wise men went to the King and said: 'It is a grain of corn.'

At this the King was much surprised; and he ordered the learned men to find out when and where such corn had grown. The learned men pondered again, and searched in their books, but could find nothing about it. So, they returned to the King and said: 'We can give you no answer. There is nothing about it in our books. You will have to ask the *peasants*³; perhaps some of them may have heard from their fathers when and where grain grew to such a size.'

So, the King gave orders that some very old peasant should be brought before him; and his servants found such a man and brought him to the King. Old and bent, ashy pale and toothless, he just managed with the help of two *crutches*⁴ to *totter*⁵ into the King's presence.

The King showed him the grain, but the old man

☺ As you read the story, try to answer the questions in the margin.

1. (n) valley
2. (n) line

Q1. What is the main event?

Q2. Who are the characters?

Q3. Where did the story take place?

3. (n) poor farmer

4. (n) a pair of long sticks for walking

5. (v) walk unsteadily

could hardly see it; he took it, however, and felt it with his hands. The King questioned him, saying: 'Can you tell us, old man, where such grain as this grew? Have you ever bought such corn, or sown such in your fields?' The old man was so deaf that he could hardly hear what the King said, and only understood with great difficulty.

'No!' he answered at last, 'I never *sowed*⁶ nor *reaped*⁷ any like it in my fields, nor did I ever buy any such. When we bought corn, the grains were always as small as they are now. But you might ask my father. He may have heard where such grain grew.'

So, the King sent for the old man's father, and he was found and brought before the King. He came walking with one crutch. The King showed him the grain, and the old peasant, who was still able to see, took a good look at it. And the King asked him:

'Can you not tell us, old man, where corn like this used to grow? Have you ever bought any like it, or sown any in your fields?'

Though the old man was rather hard of hearing, he still heard better than his son had done.

'No,' he said, 'I never sowed nor reaped any grain like this in my field. As to buying, I never bought any, for in my time money was not yet in use. Every one grew his own corn, and when there was any need we shared with one another. I do not know where corn like this grew. Ours was larger and yielded more flour than present-day grain, but I never saw any like this. I have, however, heard

Q4. What is the turning point of the story?

6. (v) plant a seed

7. (v) harvest