

Title: Ivan Cankar on the Suffering of Humiliated Girls and the Question of Forgiveness
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Ivan Cankar, the most important Slovenian writer, encountered much suffering among humiliated children while living in Vienna at the turn of the century. His subsequent literary depictions of such suffering rank among his most heartrending narratives, and especially moving is his beautiful and profound novel *The Ward of our Lady of Mercy* (1901/1902). This novel depicts the lives of fourteen syphilis-afflicted girls interned at the hospital “Our Lady of Mercy.” Cankar provides an account of the various forms of sexual abuse these prepubescent and adolescent girls have suffered at the hands of their depraved parents. When the guilty come to acknowledge the spiritual triumph of the girls, who are imbued with an almost divine gentleness, the conditions for spiritual and moral transformation are set. In other words, it is the suffering of innocent children that creates the conditions for recognition of guilt, as well as for forgiveness, reconciliation, and new life. Cankar’s claim that *The Ward of our Lady of Mercy* is the deepest and most authentic expression of his personality is a testament to his belief – expressed also elsewhere in his works – that suffering is necessary for spiritual purity of human existence. After briefly considering parallels to Dostoyesky’s suffering children in *The Brothers Karamazov* and to Gerhard Hauptmann’s “dream poem” *The Assumption of Hannele*, the paper focuses on Cankar’s considerably different mode of portraying the suffering of innocent children. Cankar’s unique contribution is examined in stylistic, psychological, and moral terms. These aspects, as well as suffering as a catalyst for forgiveness, led the novelist Ivan Pregelj to declare in 1920 that *The Ward of our Lady of Mercy* “is one of the first Slovenian works which might be taken up in translation by every European.”