

# **The Collected Tales of Nikolai Gogol Study Guide**

**The Collected Tales of Nikolai Gogol by Nikolai Gogol**

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# St. John's Eve

## St. John's Eve Summary

The story is about Pyotr Kinless. Pyotr is also known as Petrus and Petro. Pyotr is madly in love with a beauty beyond compare. Her name is Pidorka. They kiss and the sound of the kiss is so loud that her father hears it. He takes a whip, intending to beat Petrus. Pidorka's little brother, Ivas, holds onto his father so that he cannot beat Petrus. Pidorka's father Korzh is forcing her marry someone else because Petrus is poor.

A man, Basavriuk, who is actually the Devil, tells Petro he will lead him to a place where he can get the gold he needs to marry Pidorka. The man leads Petro to a strange forest with flowers of every description. A witch appears and tells him he cannot have the gold until he provides human blood. She brings him a small child covered in a white sheet and tells him he must decapitate the child. The child is Ivas. Although at first he refuses, he slays the child then falls into a deep sleep. When he awakens, there are two stacks of gold next to him but he cannot remember how he got them. Korzh is pleased with the gold Petrus has and allows Petrus and Pidorka to marry. As time passes, Petro becomes despondent and goes mad. Pidorka consults wizards to help him and brings the hag to Petrus who then remembers what happens. Petrus kills the witch and Ivas reappears momentarily but disappears again. Petrus turns to ashes and the gold to shards. Pidorka joins a convent. Basavriuk, who disappeared when Petrus found the gold, reappears and the townspeople think he is the devil. The tavern that Basavriuk always patronized, turns into a hovel where the townspeople fear the devil lived.

## St. John's Eve Analysis

The sins of lust and greed enable the Devil to destroy the lives of Petrus and Pidorka, the main characters. Pyotr Kinless, also called Petrus, is in love with the beautiful Pidorka but her father will not let her marry him because he is poor. The father, Korzh, tries to beat Petrus but Pidorka's little brother Ivas holds his father back. The Devil, in the form of a friend, Basavriuk, leads Petrus to a magical forest to find the gold that will enable him to marry Pidorka. In essence, Petrus makes a deal with the Devil.

The Devil uses an old witch who forces him to kill a small boy before he can have the gold. The small child is Ivas. Petrus beheads the child and goes into a deep sleep. When he awakes, he cannot remember how he got the gold sitting next to him. Petrus and Pidorka marry but Petrus goes mad and is eventually killed by the Devil who destroys the gold. Pidorka is miserable and joins a convent. The sins of lust and greed enable the Devil to destroy the lives of Petrus and Pidorka. The little brother, Ivas, is the martyr. The pure soul, not accidentally sheathed in white during his death scene, of Ivas symbolizes good being defeated temporarily by evil.



# The Night Before Christmas

## The Night Before Christmas Summary

One snowy night, Solokha, a witch, steals the stars and the Devil takes the moon, leaving the townspeople of Dikanka in pitch darkness. The Devil has orchestrated this because he is upset with the town blacksmith, Valuka, who paints religious pictures as a pastime. A beautiful but very vain girl, Oksana, is the focus of young men of the village. Solokha is in league with the Devil to cause mischief in the lives of Valuka and Choub, Oksana's father. Solokha wants to marry Oksana's wealthy widowed father. She does not want her son to marry Oksana and gain Choub's wealth. The Devil wants to cause hate between Valuka and Choub so that Choub will beat Valuka who would then be unable to paint religious pictures.

Later the moon slips back out of the Devil's pocket and restores the town's moonlight. Solokha is quite accommodating to the men in the village. The Devil is in her house wanting her favors. He hides in a sack when other men come to visit her. Oksana tells Valuka she will marry him if he brings her the tsarina's shoes. When Valuka returns home, he takes the sacks outside. The Devil comes out of the sack and makes a deal with Valuka. Oksana can be his if Valuka, the most pious man in the town, teaches the Devil how to corrupt the other townspeople. Valuka and the Devil take off flying to the tsarina's palace. Valuka joins the Cossacks who lead him to the tsarina. By complimenting her, he is able to get a pair of her golden shoes. When he returns to Dikanka, he beats the devil who runs off. He is repentant for even considering giving up his religion. He and Oksana marry and have a baby and Valuka continues to paint religious pictures throughout the town. He paints one of the suffering Devil in Hell.

## The Night Before Christmas Analysis

In this story the Devil is defeated by Valuka, the most pious man in the town of Dikanka. The Devil is angry at Valuka the blacksmith who paints religious pictures and icons in his leisure time. Valuka wants to win Oksana's heart but she is vain and will only marry him if he gives her a pair of the Tsarina's shoes. Valuka uses the Devil to get the shoes; however, he beats the Devil and chases him away.

Valuka weakens the Devil by threatening to cross himself, the possibility of which terrified the evil one. This religious individual, though at first tempted by the Devil, defeats him—illustrating the victory of good over evil. Even though Valuka chases off the Devil, he still has guilt about his fall from grace in evoking the help of the Devil. However, Valuka is repentant and is forgiven. He vows to become even more devoted and continues to draw religious pictures as a show of his piety, a double blow to the Devil.



# The Terrible Vengeance

## The Terrible Vengeance Summary

Captain Gorobets is holding a large wedding celebration for his son. Many Cossacks are present and there is much dancing, drinking and celebrating. A sorcerer appears at the wedding but quickly disappears. The Captain's brother, Danilo, also a Cossack, and his wife Katerina and their baby leave the wedding to travel by boat down the Dnieper. Katerina fears the sorcerer may cause them harm or death. When ghosts appear in a cemetery they pass, Danilo assures Katerina there is nothing to fear.

When Danilo and Katerina return home, Danilo and Katerina's father become angered at one another and have a sword fight and then a duel with muskets. Katerina's father shoots Danilo in the arm after which they come to a truce. Katerina has a dream that he is the evil sorcerer. Danilo witnesses him turn into the sorcerer. Danilo imprisons the father in the cellar where he awaits execution. Katrina's father convinces her to free him. Danilo survives an attack by Polacks but is shot and killed by his father-in-law. Captain Gorobets brings Katerina and the baby to Kiev for her protection. One morning when they wake, they look in the crib and the baby has been stabbed and is dead. Katerina goes mad and searches for her father to kill him. A visitor claims to be an old friend of Danilo. The visitor claims that Danilo wanted Katerina to marry him if he should die. Katerina sees that the man is actually her father and tries to stab him. He indeed is her father. He wrests the knife from her and kills her. A mysterious horseman plagues the sorcerer and finally murders him.

The father was Petro, a Cossack who long ago had killed his brother Ivan and his son. God allowed Ivan to decide Petro's punishment which was that Petro's descendants would all have terrible fates and that Petro would be the last of his kin to survive. Once Petro's family was dead, God would allow Ivan to rise again and kill Petro.

## The Terrible Vengeance Analysis

Petro brings a curse on his kin and all his descendants. He long ago killed his brother Ivan and his son. His sin was so evil that God allowed Ivan to decide the punishment. While Petro killed off all his relatives—his wife, daughter, grandson and son-in-law among others—he was working toward his own end. All the misery he was causing was only leading to his own end. For Petro to receive his final punishment from a resurrected Ivan he had to be the last one alive in his family. Ivan appears as a mysterious man in armor with a child asleep behind him on the horse, representing his dead son. The moral of this story is that though one escapes punishment for his sins time after time in this life, he will eventually meet his punishment in the end. The punishment, though delivered by Ivan, was really at the hand of God.



# Ivan Fyodorovich Shponka and His Aunt

## Ivan Fyodorovich Shponka and His Aunt Summary

Ivan Fyodorovich is a young man in high school. He is the perfect student, always paying attention and always prepared. At 17, Ivan joins the infantry regiment. Ivan is very timid and not very social, spending a lot of time alone while his fellow soldiers are carousing and drinking. After 11 years, he is promoted to sub-lieutenant. During this time, he hears of his mother's death. His Aunt, who is tending to his estate, writes to Ivan telling him he should resign from the Army. She is frail and ill and can no longer take care of his matters.

Ivan resigns from the infantry and begins the long trek by rented carriage to his farmstead in Vytrebenki. Staying at an inn one night, he meets Grigory Grigorievich who turns out to be a neighbor with a farmstead only a few miles from Vytrebenki. Ivan reaches his estate and is greeted by his Aunt, estate workers and many dogs. Ivan is surprised by his Aunt, Vasilisa Kashporovna's appearance. The woman who claimed to be frail and ill is big and strong and healthy like a man. Ivan enjoys taking over managing his estate, although his Aunt does not let him do so entirely. She also has a very intimidating, dominant personality. His Aunt tells Ivan that his mother had a deed to the adjoining property but must have lost it. Grigory Grigorievich is living there now. Ivan tells his Aunt that he knows him having met him on the road and will go talk to him.

Ivan visits Grigory to discuss the property. Grigory exclaims that the Aunt is lying—the property was not left to Ivan. Grigory insists that Ivan stay for dinner. They are joined by another farmer Ivan Ivanovich, Grigory's two sisters and their mother. Upon return, his Aunt Vasilisa is disheartened that he did not get the deed from Grigory. She has a new plan. She suggests to Ivan that he should marry the young, blond daughter. Ivan and his Aunt visit Grigory's farmstead. Grigory is not there so they visit with the others. Vasilisa talks to the mother about Ivan and her daughter marrying. The mother is in favor of it. Ivan is adamant that he is not the marrying kind. When Ivan tries to sleep that night, he has nightmares about having a wife. The story, the reader is told, continues in the next tale, *Old World Landowners*.

## Ivan Fyodorovich Shponka and His Aunt Analysis

The main character in this tale is Ivan who is a very timid young man. His shyness is in contrast to his Aunt who is bold and intimidating and as big and as strong as a man. His neighbor Grigory also has a very dominating personality. Ivan is so timid that it is difficult for him to finish a sentence. The only person he meets who is as timid as he is the younger sister of Grigory. Ivan's Aunt Vasilisa is trying to force him to marry the girl. She wants the marriage to take place so that she will have a legal stake in Grigory's property which she claims really belongs to Ivan. Ivan is terrified of marriage and tells his Aunt that he does not want to marry. He has horrible nightmares about having multiple wives

which only makes him more certain that he does not want to marry. The Aunt is not giving up and the the story picks up in the next tale.



# Old World Landowners

## Old World Landowners Summary

This story starts out about an old couple, Afanasy Ivanovich and his wife Pulkheria Ivanovna. They are a very quiet couple who keep to themselves. The most remarkable thing about their house is that the doors sing. As soon as the sun comes up each door sings its own distinctive song. The old couple has many serf girls and stewards on the farmstead who do most of the laborious jobs. The old couple oversees and manages the farm. There are many fruits—melons, pears, berries—raised on the farm. The old couple, especially Afanasy, eats many meals throughout the day served to them by the serf girls. Afanasy likes to tease his wife. He "pokes fun at her" by wanting to know what they would do if their house burned down.

Pulkheria has a favorite gray pet cat. The cat is missing for three days when it finally reappears but is now showing the behaviors of a wild cat. Pulkheria takes the cat's transformation as a bad omen. Pulkheria becomes sad and tells Afanasy that she will die this summer. Pulkheria arranges for one of the housekeepers to take care of Afanasy. She dies shortly after that and Afanasy is thrown into a deep depression. After five years of this misery, Afanasy dies. A distant relative who used to be a sub-lieutenant claims the estate.

## Old World Landowners Analysis

The theme of this story is life-long love and companionship. Afanasy and Pulkheria have a good, long life together. When Pulkheria dies, Afanasy is devastated and lives for only five more miserable years without her. When Pulkheria's cat turns on her—that is runs off and returns as a wild cat—Pulkheria takes that as a sign that she will soon die. This is no doubt connected to a superstition of the culture at the time. When she tells Afanasy that she will die, she tells him not to grieve. Pulkheria is only concerned about Afanasy's welfare and orders a servant to watch after him once she is gone. After he dies, the prior story, Ivan Fyodorovich Shponka and His Aunt, has resolution. This farm was the disputed land and Ivan comes to claim it. Since the prior story ended with the "Aunt not giving up," the question lingers if she had anything to do with the gray cat turning wild.





# Viy

## Viy Summary

"Viy" is a name given by people in little Russian (The Ukraine) to the Chief of the Gnomes. Translator's note: The story is a popular legend in The Ukraine. This story begins at the Bratsky Monastery in Kiev. The students and professors are finished for the semester and are going home for the summer. Three students, Khoma Brut, Tiberiy Gorobets and Khalajava, lose their way in the dark night. They come upon a farmstead and convince the proprietor, an old lady, to let them stay the night. She separates them into different sleeping areas. The old woman enters Khoma's sleeping area, transfixes him and rides him like a horse into the dark night. He has no power over his body and realizes she is a witch. Khoma beats the old hag and he kills her. As the old hag lies dying she turns into a beautiful young woman. Khoma decides not to return to the farm; instead he returns to Kiev.

Against his will, Khoma is to give the eulogy for the beautiful dead young daughter of a Cossack chief. The girl requested that Khoma say prayers over her dead body for three nights. The Cossack questions the connection between his daughter and Khoma. Khoma has no idea why he was chosen for the vigil prayers. The Cossack says his daughter was murdered and he vows to have revenge on the guilty. When Khoma has a chance to look at the dead girl, he sees she is the witch he killed. Others in the town believe her to be a witch and share their experiences with the dead girl. She appeared as a dog once and drank a baby's blood; she had ridden another like she did Khoma; and, she had performed many other acts of mischief. Khoma begins saying prayers in the church where her body is. She rises out of her coffin and tries to grab Khoma. However, Khoma is protected by his prayers and the circle he had drawn around himself. Finally she returns to her coffin and the lid slams shut. The second night, the corpse again rises but once again cannot penetrate the circle.

Khoma does not want to go back for the third night of prayers telling the father that his daughter is a witch. However, the girl's father threatens to beat him if he does not. The father offers to give Khoma a thousand gold pieces if he finishes the vigil. The father wants to fulfill his daughter's wish that her soul be saved. Khoma is unsuccessful in an escape attempt and is brought to the church for the third night of prayers. He draws the circle around himself and begins reciting incantations. The witch's body rises and the room is swept into chaos with monsters and spirits everywhere. A voice says to find Viy. Viy enters and curses Khoma, causing his spirit to leave his body. When Khoma's friends hear about his fate, Tiberiy said that the witch did not kill him but his fear did. He should have spit on her and crossed himself.



## Viy Analysis

Khoma did a good and brave deed when he killed the evil witch. The father of the young dead girl requests that Khoma read the prayers over her body but Khoma is astonished, having no idea why he was selected for this vigil. The young girl is in fact the witch who wants to get Khoma into her clutches so she can avenge her death. She is not repentant for her evil doings and not concerned with saving her soul as she had told her father. Each night Khoma says prayers and incantations (exorcisms) to defeat her. He draws a circle around himself which she cannot penetrate. Although he was protected by his prayers and the circle he drew, he was none the less losing faith that he could defeat her. By the third night, Khoma was so afraid of the witch that he tries to escape. Instead of facing his demons he tries to run from them. God was protecting him with the circle and the words of his prayers, but his growing fear did not allow him to see that reality. In the end the witch (evil) defeated him, not with her powers but with his own weakness of faith.



# The Story of How Ivan Ivanovich Quarreled with Ivan Nikiforovich

## The Story of How Ivan Ivanovich Quarreled with Ivan Nikiforovich Summary

Ivan Ivanovich is a much admired and well-off man living outside the town of Mirgorod. His friend and neighbor is Ivan Nikiforovich who is also an excellent person, though just a notch below Ivanovich. Ivanovich discovers that his neighbor has a gun and concludes that Nikiforovich does not need it. Ivanovich visits Nikiforovich and asks him for the gun in exchange for a brown sow and two sacks of oats. Nikiforovich is insulted and refuses and calls Ivanovich a goose. Ivanovich is highly insulted and the two are no longer friends. A family friend, Agafya Fedoseevna comes to visit Nikiforovich. She is a very domineering woman who discourages Nikiforovich from reconciling with Ivanovich. Nikiforovich builds a goose pen that overlaps onto Ivanovich's property.

One night, Ivanovich sees the legs off the pen and it comes crashing down. He is fearful of retribution and has his servants watch for any trouble from Nikiforovich. Ivanovich decides to file a complaint with the courts before there is any reaction from Nikiforovich. Ivanovich contends in his complaint that Nikiforovich called him a goose, built a goose pen partially on his property, and intends to burn his house down. He further requests that Nikiforovich be fined, repay Ivanovich for losses and be jailed. The Judge tries to talk Ivanovich out of filing the complaint and to reconcile with Nikiforovich. Soon after, Nikiforovich appears at the court and files a complaint against Ivanovich claiming that he is a robber, blasphemer and crook. Nikiforovich states that Ivanovich's punishment should be loss of nobility, jailing and thrashing and repayment of Nikiforovich's losses. The court accepts both complaints but just as the Judge is leaving, a brown sow runs into the court house and chomps on and runs off with Nikiforovich's complaint document that was still on the table.

The Judge turns the matter over to the Police Chief who visits Ivanovich. The Police Chief informs Ivanovich that his sow purloined the complaint document and that Ivanovich must bring the sow before the magistrate. Ivanovich thinks the entire matter is outlandish and refuses to cooperate. The Police Chief encourages Ivanovich to reconcile with Nikiforovich. Nikiforovich threatens to file a complaint with a higher court unless the sow is charged and punished. His complaint is accepted but remains on the shelf for years. Many attempts at reconciling the old friends are made over the years but none is successful. The Police Chief gives a party for the townspeople. Ivanovich is present but Nikiforovich is not. A lovable townsman, Anton Prokofievich is sent to lure Nikiforovich to the party so that he and Ivanovich can finally mend their friendship. Nikiforovich does attend the party but winds up insulting Ivanovich again by mentioning the "goose" comment.



Years pass and the storyteller visits Mirgorod and finds both Nikiforovich and Ivanovich still at odds and still both having faith that the courts will find in favor of their complaints.

## **The Story of How Ivan Ivanovich Quarreled with Ivan Nikiforovich Analysis**

In this story, two life-long friends become bitter enemies. Ivanovich has the reputation as an excellent gentleman. However, Ivanovich oversteps the boundaries of friendship by presuming that his friend Nikiforovich does not need the gun he has and suggests he accepts items in exchange for it which Nikiforovich deems inferior. Perhaps because Ivanovich is so revered by everyone, he is accustomed to getting his own way. When Nikiforovich continues to balk at Ivanovich's request, Ivanovich becomes irritated and presses the issue. Nikiforovich becomes frustrated with his neighbor's insistence and winds up calling Ivanovich a vile name (a goose). The pampered Ivanovich is supremely insulted and stops speaking to his neighbor. Each neighbor files a complaint with the local court in hopes of punishing the other.

Despite repeated attempts over the years by many people, the two men refuse to reconcile. Their stubbornness and pride prevents them from resolving what in essence were trivial offenses. By clinging to their prideful stances, they avoid each other, stay away from social events in fear of seeing each other and make other people uneasy. Even after many years with no progress on their court complaints, each one clings to his hope that the court will find for him. Both end up bitter and obsessed men who age well beyond their years.



# Nevsky Prospect

## Nevsky Prospect Summary

Nevsky Prospect is a famous street in St. Petersburg with shops and businesses and many attractions that bring in local residents as well as tourists from many countries. One evening a shy young artist named Piskarev spots a beautiful young dark-haired woman and is encouraged by Lieutenant Pirogov to follow her. Pirogov is smitten with a blonde girl he notices. The dark-haired girl is the most heavenly creature Piskarev has ever seen. At first, Piskarev thinks the girl is annoyed by his following her and stays back. However, she smiles at him and beckons him. They come to a four-story building and enter an apartment inside. The place is in disarray and there are several young girls sitting around. Piskarev concludes unhappily that he has entered a brothel. Piskarev runs off back to Nevsky Prospect, returning to his apartment. He has a sleepless night and can think only of the beautiful girl and how she could have been a grand lady.

He has a dream that the girl sends a carriage for him that takes him to a grand parlor with well-heeled men and women. Piskarev finally finds the beauty in a group of dancing girls. Piskarev wakes up only then realizing it was a dream. He tries to fall asleep and dream of her again but cannot. Piskarev is so distraught that he is unable to sleep and seeks the help of a Persian shop owner who sells opium. Piskarev takes the opium and begins dreaming of the girl again. He pictures her as his wife and vows to marry her. He finds the girl and proposes but she laughs at him. He rushes home and slashes his throat. There is no one to weep at his funeral.

At the same time Piskarev takes off to follow the dark-haired girl, Pirogov follows the blond. The Lieutenant and the blond wind up in a tin maker's dwelling. In one room there are two drunken men. Schiller is asking the other man, Hoffman, to cut his nose off because he spends too much on snuff. Pirogov puts a stop to this impending tragedy. The next day Pirogov returns to the shop and finds that the blonde woman is married to Schiller. None the less, he continues to pursue the woman. He catches her alone and makes a pass at her and is caught by her husband. Pirogov is beaten badly by her husband and another man.

## Nevsky Prospect Analysis

This short story ends with the declaration that on Nevsky Prospect "the Devil himself lights the lamps only so as to show everything not as it really is." Nevsky Prospect is thus a study in self-delusion. The timid artist, Piskarev is so taken with beauty that he fails to see the dark-haired girl as she really is. Even though it is clear the girl is a prostitute, he makes excuses for her. Perhaps she was forced into this life. His dreams of her as a perfect wife seduce him into delusional thinking. He banks so much on her becoming his wife that he commits suicide when he is rejected. However, the suicide is not based on her reality but rather on his imaginings.



Pirogov actually sees the German girl for what she is and has not devolved into madness like Piskarev. The blonde girl is a married woman but he vows to pursue her and steal her away. Where Pirogov is irrational is in his determination to steal the girl away from her husband even though she has given no sign that she has any interest in him. He does not wind up with the girl but survives, unlike his unfortunate young friend Piskarev who commits suicide.

The narrator places the blame on the street—that things are not what they seem to be. The true fault however lies in the lack of strength of character in the two men and their unwillingness to face reality.



# Diary of a Madman

## Diary of a Madman Summary

The narrator of the story is also the diary writer. His name is Aksenty Ivanovich. Ivanovich is of noble birth and works for an important director, a government official, who has a beautiful daughter with whom Ivanovich is quite smitten. The diary he keeps is filled with thoughts of the director's daughter. He writes that he waits outside her gate just for the chance to get a glance of her. One of Ivanovich's main office duties is sharpening pens for the director. He also happily sharpens pens for the daughter as well.

Ivanovich is not as well-heeled as some of his contemporaries, does not have much savings and is forty-two years old. However, because of his nobility, he feels he has a lot to offer. One of his co-workers chides him about mooning after the director's daughter, putting the knife in further by telling Ivanovich that he does not have a prayer in attracting her. Ivanovich writes that one day he witnessed Medgi (the girl's dog) and another dog Fidele speaking to one another and concludes that they might also exchange correspondence. He follows Fidele home one day in case he needs to know where the dog lives. Ivanovich dreams of how wonderful the inner rooms where the daughter lives must be.

Ivanovich is determined to find out more about her, so he sets out to find out more from the dog Fidele or from the correspondence between the dogs. A young girl answers the door and allows Ivanovich to enter. Fidele bites him in the calf but he manages to rummage through the dog bed and snatch a stack of letters. He learns that the girl, Sophie is in love with a certain gentleman who visits her. Medgi writes that the clerk who sharpens the pens in the office is ugly and that Sophie laughs at him. Ivanovich is horrified that the dog is writing about him. Finally he learns that Sophie wants to marry the gentleman. In frustration and despair, Ivanovich tears up the letters.

Ivanovich hears news that the King of Spain died and that a new king has not been appointed as yet. He comes to realize that he, Ivanovich, is actually the King of Spain. At his office, he signs official papers as King Ferdinand III. He storms into Sophie's bedroom and tells the frightened girl that they will be together. A short time later, he makes an entry in his diary that he is in Madrid, Spain. When he arrives in "Spain" he is told that he can refer to himself as King Ferdinand but if he does so he will be beaten. His head is shaved, he is beaten and tortured. Ivanovich concludes that he must be under the Inquisition. He notes that the Dey of Algiers has a bump under his nose.

## Diary of a Madman Analysis

There are many comedic aspects to this story. Even though the diary writer is arguably mad, which is not funny, the fact that he thinks dogs are having conversations and



exchanging correspondence is funny. At first, Ivanovich seems rather normal. He goes to work and does his job, which consists largely of sharpening pens. He is of nobility but is a shy man who finds it difficult to strike up conversations with his boss or with Sophie, the Director's daughter, with whom he is in love. Ivanovich's descent into madness is first apparent when he thinks the dogs are talking as mentioned above. He steals their letters to gain insight into Sophie's personal life. When he reads that Sophie is in love with another and plans to marry, it puts him over the edge. He starts to believe that he is King Ferdinand III of Spain and is just waiting for the Spanish authorities to pick him up and take him to Spain. He is picked up by authorities all right but is not taken to Spain.

Instead, he is taken to an insane asylum where he is treated harshly and tortured by the caretakers. He maintains his claims to royalty to the end, concluding that he must be suffering under the Inquisition. He makes reference to the presence of the Dey of Algiers, indicating that another inmate also thinks he is of royal stock.





# The Nose

## The Nose Summary

Ivan Yakovlevich, the barber, prepares to eat a loaf of bread for breakfast one morning. When he cuts it in half, there is something white in the middle. It turns out to be a nose. His wife accuses him of cutting someone's nose off. The barber recognizes the nose as one of his clients, the collegiate assessor Kovalev. Ivan suggests he will put the nose in the corner but his wife, Praskovya, will not hear of it. So instead, Ivan wraps up the nose and tells his wife he will dispose of it. Ivan walks all over town with it and has a hard time getting rid of it. In one instance he drops it and another man wanting to be helpful tells him he dropped something. Finally, he goes across the St. Isaac's Bridge and at the top of the bridge drops the nose into the river. A policeman sees that Ivan was on the bridge and asks him what he was doing there. Ivan lies, saying he was on his way to work.

Collegiate assessor Kovalev wakes up in the morning and wants to check a pimple that had popped out on his nose. He looks in the mirror and instead of a nose is there is an area as flat as a pancake. His nose is gone. Kovalev goes out in search of his nose. As he walks along, he has his collar up and a handkerchief across his face so that no one will see that he has no nose. He steps into a pastry shop and spots a mirror. Kovalev is thinking that perhaps it was a dream or he was mistaken and that he actually still has his nose. He takes his handkerchief off and looks in the mirror—no nose. When he leaves the pastry shop, a carriage stops right in front of him. To his utter amazement, emerging from the carriage dressed in the elaborate uniform of state councillor is his nose. The nose re-enters the carriage and drives off with Major Kovalev running after it. The carriage stops at the Cathedral and the nose goes inside. Kovalev follows and finally spots the nose off in the corner praying. Kovalev positions himself near the nose and clears his throat, trying to get the nose's attention. Finally he is able to talk to his nose and tells him that he in fact is his nose. The nose thinks that is absurd and looks distastefully at Kovalev's tattered uniform, adding that they are not even in the same class.

Kovalev loses track of the nose then decides to place an ad for his nose. The clerk is reluctant to place such an ad since he does not want to lose his credibility. While he is thinking it over, he offers snuff to Kovalev who becomes angry. He points out to the man that the very thing he needs to use snuff is missing. After Kovalev is back home, a police officer brings him his nose and tells him that the barber was the culprit. Even with the help of a doctor, Kovalev cannot get the nose to stick. He writes a letter to Alexandra Podtochina who he thinks has a spell cast on him because he will not marry her daughter. She writes back indignant and indicates she is not leading him around by the nose.



Kovalev wakes one morning and the nose has mysteriously reappeared on his face. Kovalev is elated and walks proudly through the town all day, checking to make sure his nose is still on his face in every window and mirror he passes.

## The Nose Analysis

The story of Major Kovalev's missing nose is obviously a fantasy. However, Gogol is able to show his great sense of fun in this silly story. The nose leaves Major Kovalev's face mysteriously one day with no injury to his face or nose. The nose comes to have a life of its own. In fact, his nose is able to obtain a higher rank in the government than Kovalev himself. It is very funny to think of the nose dressing in a uniform topped off with a plumed hat. Somehow the nose is able to talk although noses do not have mouths. It is a religious nose as it is seen praying in a church. The nose had to have ears as well since he is able to conduct a conversation with his former face. He actually looks down his nose at his former face when he looks (with eyes) in disdain at the shabby uniform Major Kovalev is wearing. The nose gets his nose out of joint when Kovalev suggests he is actually a nose and is missing from his face, and blows him off.

Poor Kovalev is in great misery and embarrassment going around town following his nose. His nose is riding in style in his carriage while his former face is walking behind. He wants to place an ad for his nose but the printer is reluctant. He fears he will lose credibility by advertising for a missing nose. Kovalev is angered and insulted when the printer offers him snuff. He points out that the very thing he would need in order to use snuff is out there on its own, nosing around somewhere. One day the nose reappears on Kovalev's face just as mysteriously as it disappeared. The conclusion of the story is a buried confession by Gogol. The narrator concludes that such a story of a missing, rebel nose could not have really happened and was just a myth. The narrator says that the subject of a rouge nose would even be an inappropriate subject for a legitimate author to write about. Gogol is playing with his readers by having his narrator subtly scold him. However, lastly the narrator says but things like this are rare but they do happen.



# The Carriage

## The Carriage Summary

A calvary regiment has just been stationed at a town named "B." Before the soldiers arrived, the town of B was quiet and boring, hardly a goose or rooster could be seen crossing the road. Once in a great while one could see a rickety cart creaking down the road. The presence of the newly arriving officers serves to animate the entire society. The town becomes much more active and colorful with the influx of the calvary men. Officers can be seen wearing hats with large colorful plumes riding around town on their majestic steeds. Their uniform hats can be seen airing out on the fences. Everywhere one looks change can be seen. Prior to their arrival, the only town officials were a judge and the mayor, the latter of whom slept all day. With the transfer of the brigadier general's office to B, the social life of the town enjoys grand renewal. The general has his staff arrange a huge dinner celebration. The food purchased for this dinner takes most of the food from the markets. The judge and mayor are reduced to eating pancakes and custard.

One of the guests attending the general's dinner is a local landowner by the name of Pythagor Pythagorovich Chertokutsky, one of the chief aristocrats of the B Region. Pythagor had been with a regimen but retired under an unknown but allegedly scandalous situation. However, the incident did not reduce the dignity or social standing of Pythagor. He arrives at the dinner celebration in a sporty carriage. The dinner is fabulous with an array of delicacies and champagne and vodka. The men eat so much that they unbutton their uniforms as they step outside for a smoke. The general has his aide bring around a bay mare for the others to see. The beautiful mare named Agrafena Ivanova is presented to the group. The general indicates he does not have a carriage for the horse. Pythagor indicates he has a fine Viennese carriage that is light as a feather but strong enough to hold a heavy payload. Pythagor had received this carriage from an old friend. Pythagor invites the gentlemen officers to his house for dinner the next night so they can see the carriage.

Pythagor stays too long at the dinner and drinks too much. He arrives back home at 4 a.m. The next day, his wife sees the general and the others all heading for their house. She wakes Pythagor. He tells her that he invited them for dinner. Having made no arrangements he tells her to tell them he is out of town until tomorrow. He goes and hides in the carriage. When the officials are told he is not at home, they decide to look at the carriage. The carriage is pulled out for them. They are not impressed and feel it certainly is not worth much. They look inside and see Pythagor in his dressing gown and quickly leave.



## The Carriage Analysis

The town of B is reinvigorated with the influx of the soldiers of the newly relocated regiment. One of the local aristocrats, Pythagor, is invited to a grand dinner at the general's quarters. After dinner, the gentlemen officers and landowners take a look at the general's beautiful mare. Pythagor indicates he has the perfect carriage for a horse of this caliber. They are invited to Pythagor's house to see the carriage. Pythagor unfortunately stayed way to late at the general's quarters the day before, playing cards and drinking too much. The next day, the gentlemen officers arrive around noon, much to the dismay of Pythagor's wife who did not know they were invited. They were invited for dinner but arrive well before that hour. She wakes Pythagor, who is still snoring away. He tells her to lie to them that he is out of town. In the meantime, he gets his dressing gown on and races to the shed and hides in the carriage. When the officers are told Pythagor is not home they insist on seeing the carriage Pythagor spoke of the night before. A lackey brings the carriage out of the shed. The officers all agree that the carriage is not of the caliber described by Pythagor. The final humiliation is when they open the carriage door and find Pythagor hiding there in his dressing gown.

Pythagor is described as an important aristocrat in the B Region. With the regiment relocated in B, Pythagor is in a position to enjoy the renewed society brought about by their presence. After this embarrassment, he will no doubt be ostracized and shut out of this new social set. He boasted about a carriage that turned out to be ordinary and got caught in his big lie in that very same carriage.



# The Portrait

## The Portrait Summary

There is an art shop in the Shchukin market where many people of all classes stop to view the many paintings. The peasants poke at them while the gentlemen study them seriously. There are very amateurish oils among the more classic paintings. The young artist Chartkov stops by and looks through the artwork. The shopkeeper tries to talk Chartkov into paintings he does not want. The clerk gives up and lets Chartkov comb leisurely through his inventory. After quite a long time, Chartkov finds a partially finished portrait of a man with bronzed face and staring eyes. The eyes are absolutely startling in the way they seem to stare out from the painting. Chartkov and the shopkeeper agree on the price of 20 kopecks, which is the last of his money. As he leaves with the painting, people on the street seem to react to the staring eyes. Chartkov brings the painting home and is greeted by his servant boy, Nikita. They are in the dark as they have run out of candles. Nikita tells Chartkov that the landlord was by with the police for the rent and will return tomorrow.

Chartkov is an artist who showed great talent during his studies. A professor had warned him not to become commercial, painting small portraits for quick money. That behavior would not enhance his talent but ruin it. His professor also cautioned Chartkov that he was impatient and had an obsessive streak—focusing on one aspect of a piece and ignoring the others. The professor admonished him to drop the showiness and not present an arrogant presence. However, with his current financial state, his thoughts naturally turn to making money. The staring eyes of the portrait that seem all too human bother Chartkov. Chartkov cannot fall to sleep with the staring eyes upon him so he covers it with a sheet. Chartkov has a dream that the man leaves the portrait and displays a pouch marked as 1000 roubles of gold. When he awakes, although terrified by the dream, he longs for the gold he saw in the dream. The landlord and the police officer come for the rent. The landlord is not interested in any paintings for payment but the police officer moves some about. When he moves the portrait of the old man, the pouch of gold falls out.

Chartkov now has enough money for everything he ever wanted. He rents a magnificent apartment, purchases new clothes and accessories, eats in the finest restaurants and places an advertisement about his artistic skills. A woman and her daughter respond to the ad and Chartkov begins to paint the daughter. The mother has Chartkov take out flaws to make the daughter perfectly beautiful. More clients turn up at his door and word gets around about his abilities. However, these people are in a hurry and want their portraits to look perfect, to eliminate flaws and improve their looks. Chartkov goes along with their wishes and becomes even more rich and famous. His only goal is to amass more wealth. Ultimately, his painting becomes so routine that he begins to lose his talent.



He is asked by the Art Society to view the work of a young artist. This artist has devoted himself to art without concern for monetary gain or fame. When Chartkov walks into the gallery, a crowd surrounds the young artist's painting. The crowd is in silence and in awe, some are crying at the pure beauty of the work. Chartkov is astonished but starts to feign indifference. However, he cannot—he bursts into tears and rushes out. Back at his studio, he tries to paint a fallen angel but his loss of talent disallows it. He ties all his problems back to the portrait and has it removed. However, the evil of the portrait continues to haunt him. Chartkov descends into madness, becomes physically ill and dies.

Some time later, an auction is being held for the estate of a deceased art lover. Two individuals are bidding on the large portrait of the old man with the staring eyes. One bidder explains to the group why should be entitled to purchase it. The Kolomna area of Petersburg is where many poor and retired people live. There are many moneylenders who operate there. There was one moneylender who was an old man, wore Asian robes, had a bronze face and staring eyes. This moneylender would lend any amount of money to anyone. However, eventually a terrible fate would befall the person. Many people's lives were ruined by this moneylender—from royalty to the lower classes. The bidder's father was an artist and a very pious man. He was hired by this moneylender to paint his portrait. He began the painting but felt such evilness that he was unable to complete it. He was plagued with problems until he gave the painting away. The man he gave it away too also suffered and the portrait finally wound up with the art collector. The bidder's father felt great pain for painting this portrait that hurt so many people and became a monk. After years of isolation, the son finally spoke with his father again. The old man asked his son to find the portrait and destroy it. The bidder then looks at the group and together they turn to focus on the painting but it is gone. Someone stole it while they were listening to the story of the portrait.

## The Portrait Analysis

Chartkov the young artist is at first an idealist only interested in producing true art. His professor tells him to stop the showiness and concentrate on art. Since he has no money, he is seduced by the lure of gold offered by the evil man in the portrait. He abandons his talent and artistry for money and fame. His clients force him to compromise his standards by requiring him to remove their flaws and improve their looks. He becomes obsessed with amassing more gold. He realizes too late that he has taken the wrong path by abandoning his art. When he tries to recover his artistic ability, he fails. He has lost his way and cannot recover. Chartkov eventually descends into madness and dies with real or imagined eyes, like those in the painting, staring at him from all walls.

The demonic man in the portrait is a moneylender in the Kolomna region of Petersburg. This is a region where many poor people live. When he is near death, he commissions an artist to paint his portrait. The artist did so but could not complete it due to the ill feeling he felt from the painting. However, he completed enough of it to enable the evil moneylender to cast a spell on it that would cause misery and pain to anyone who owns



it. Even when the artist gives the portrait away, he suffers from the evil of the moneylender. He finally enters a monastery and finds peace and forgiveness. He tells his son to find the portrait and destroy it to stop the misery it is causing. The son is the bidder of the painting and explains the story of his father and the portrait to the group. Everyone is so rapt in the bidder's story that they fail to notice that someone steals the painting and it is gone. The portrait caused pain for its owners but could only do so if the owner was vulnerable to its power. Gogol ends the story making the reader wonder if the evil portrait is still out there.



# The Overcoat

## The Overcoat Summary

Akaky Akakievich is assigned as a clerk in a certain department of the government. The narrator feels it would not be appropriate to name that department. His main job is copying documents. When he is given anything more difficult, he becomes sweaty and nervous. The other clerks all make fun of him—how he looks, his clothes, everything about him. Akaky cares little for his appearance. There is always some foreign objects on his clothes or hat that he does brush away. Akaky is obsessed with his job and pays little attention to anything else, even a fly in his soup. He brings home documents to copy at night.

The cold winter wind in Petersburg blows right through Akaky's threadbare overcoat. He decides to take it to the one-eyed tailor, Petrovich, for repair. Petrovich is often drunk and charges too little for his work but on this night he is sober and welcomes Akaky. Much to Akaky's dismay, Petrovich says the overcoat is not repairable. It is too frayed and any patchwork done on it will not last. Petrovich tells him he will make him a new overcoat. However, at 150 roubles, Akaky cannot afford it. Akaky leaves, planning to return when Petrovich is drunk and his wife is not there. Akaky sees Petrovich's wife leave the next Sunday and goes to see the drunken Petrovich. Even though he is not sober, Petrovich still insists he cannot repair the coat and will make Akaky a new one. Petrovich will make the new coat for 80 roubles. Akaky has 40 saved and saves the rest by conserving on food, candlelight and tea for the next six months. He conserves in other ways; for example, he makes himself take light steps on the cobblestones so his shoe soles last longer. Finally, he has enough money and Petrovich, using the finest material, makes his new overcoat.

The morning Petrovich brings the new coat over, Akaky wears the perfect-fitting overcoat to work. The co-workers are happy for him and want him to throw a party to celebrate. Akaky gets out of giving a party by telling his co-workers that his coat is not new. Another worker decides to throw the party. Akaky tries to get out of going but the others shame him into attending. He walks to the party and stays longer than he planned. On his way home, he has to pass through some desolate neighborhoods. Suddenly, two men approach him, mug him and take his overcoat. He runs home to the landlady who tells him to go to the police superintendent. Akaky makes his report but nothing happens. His co-workers feel sorry for him and take up a collection but it is not near enough to buy another coat. He decides to go to the "important person" who is the highest person in the department. The important person is a kind man but feels vastly superior to anyone with a lower rank. The important person hears his complaint about the stolen overcoat but is outraged that he failed to go through the chain of command. Akaky feels blistered, returns home to his sick bed where he becomes deathly ill and dies. Rumors soon abound that the ghost of Akaky is accosting people near the bridge, trying to get their overcoats. One night the important person is riding home in his carriage and suddenly feels a tug on his back. He turns to see the dead face of Akaky





demanding his overcoat. Akaky takes the coat. Some say he disappeared, while others still swear they see him.

## The Overcoat Analysis

Akaky Akakievich does not expect much out of life and that is exactly what he gets. He is timid and finds it difficult to finish sentences. However, for some reason what he does pursue rather aggressively is a new overcoat. Akaky is a man who the others he works with mock and ridicule. He has no social life, no joy. Yet, when he purchases a new overcoat he feels true satisfaction and happiness for the first time in his life. Akaky saves for six months for the overcoat. He adds that savings to his other roubles that he has stored up over the years. He willingly pays for the overcoat and proudly wears it to work. His formerly cruel co-workers seem to accept him more warmly. Perhaps his pride in his overcoat gave him an attractive self-confidence he lacked before.

Unfortunately, when he is returning home from the party, he is beaten and robbed of his beloved overcoat. Akaky goes to the superintendent of police with no results. He gets up the nerve to go to the "important person" at work for help but is totally rebuffed. Losing his overcoat is too much for Akaky. He soon falls ill and dies. There are signs that a dead man who looks like Akaky is scaring people down by the bridge and demanding their coats. One evening, he attacks the "important person" and takes his coat. Some say they never see him again and some say he still is lurking around the bridge.

Life just was not fair for Akaky. He did not bother anyone. The most prized possession he ever had was taken from him. Gogol was just telling a rather sad story with little if any redeeming quality.



# Characters

## Pyotr Kinless appears in St. John's Eve

Pyotr Kinless is also called by the name of "Petrus." His last name Kinless refers to his lack of relatives, or kin. Petrus falls in love with the beautiful Pidorka. She wants to marry him but he is poor and has no gold so her father will not allow the marriage. Pidorka's father tries to beat him but her little brother, Ivas, is able to hold his father back. In a tavern, he meets up with a man named Basavruik who actually turns out to be the Devil. Petrus is so desperate to marry Pidorka that he makes a deal with the Devil.

Basavruik leads Petrus to an enchanted forest where he finds gold. A witch will not allow him to take the gold until he provides human blood. The witch provides him with a small child to slay. The child is Pidorka's little brother, Ivas. Petrus beheads the child after which he falls into a deep sleep. When he awakes, there is gold next to him but does not remember how he obtained it and has no recollection of murdering Ivas. Petrus and Pidorka marry. Although Petrus cannot consciously remember what happened, his soul is tortured and he goes mad. The Devil, in the form of the witch, returns and destroys Petrus and the gold.

## Ivan Ivanovich appears in The Story of How Ivan Ivanovich Quarreled with Ivan

Ivan Ivanovich is a much admired gentlemen in the township of Mirgorod and surrounding farmland. He is described as a perfect gentleman, inquisitive, interested in others, kind to the poor, generous with his wealth and resources. Even down to his bekesh (overcoat) he is considered perfect in every way. Ivanovich has a perfect house with a large porch, thatched roof and posts of oak all the way around. When he opens his windows, branches with apples and pears literally extend into the room and are there for the taking. In the back garden, he has a myriad of fruit and vegetables: plums, cherries, black cherries, sunflowers, cucumbers, melons and beans.

The parish priest holds Ivanovich in the highest regard. He often says that he knows no lay man who better fulfills his Christian responsibilities than Ivan Ivanovich. He is most pious and attends church regularly. When he enters the church, he goes right to the choir and sings along with them. Ivanovich is a generous man offering food to beggars along with some kind words. He has been a widower for ten years. Though he does not have children himself, he allows the children of his servants to climb all over his yard and offers them bagels and other snacks.



## **Major Kovalev appears in The Nose**

Major Kovalev is the unfortunate collegiate assessor whose nose goes missing and begins a life of its own.

## **Valuka appears in Night Before Christmas**

Valuka is the town's blacksmith in the village of Dikanka. Valuka is the most pious person in the entire area. In his leisure time he paints religious pictures and icons.

## **Ivan Fyodorovich appears in Ivan Fyodorovich and His Aunt**

Ivan Fyodorovich is the meek army sub-lieutenant who inherits his mother's farmstead.

## **Khoma Brut appears in Viy**

Khoma Brut is the philosophy student who kills the witch who was terrorizing the townspeople. Unfortunately, Khoma loses his faith and is destroyed by the witch's evil spirit.

## **Aksenty Ivanovich appears in Diary of a Madman**

Aksenty Ivanovich is the journal writer in this tongue-in-cheek story. Ivanovich descends into madness over unrequited love.

## **Pythagor Pythagorovich Chertokutsky appears in The Carriage**

Pythagor Pythagorovich Chertokutsky is the aristocratic landowner who boasts about his grand carriage to the officer gentlemen of the new regiment assigned to the B Region of the Ukraine.

## **Chartkov, the Artist appears in The Portrait**

Chartkov, is the young artist who abandons his talent for riches and becomes famous for flattering portraits of the aristocracy.



## **Akaky Akakievich appears in The Overcoat**

Akaky Akakievich is the dedicated government clerk who enjoys his job copying documents. The tailor will not fix his threadbare overcoat so Akaky orders a new one.



## **Objects/Places**

### **The Three Knolls appears in St. John's Eve**

The Devil leads the main character, Petrus, to the three knolls, a magical forest that contains flowers with special powers and that lead Petrus to the gold he is seeking.

### **St. Petersburg appears in The Night Before Christmas**

St. Petersburg is the site of the tsarina's palace where Valuka travels to get a pair of the tsarina's shoes for Oksana.

### **Kiev appears in The Terrible Vengeance**

Kiev is the setting for the grand wedding celebration of the son of the Cossack Captain Gorobets.

### **Mirogorod, The Ukraine appears in The Story of How Ivan Ivanovich Quarreled with Ivan Nikiforo**

The court house in Mirogorod in the Ukraine is where Ivan Ivanovich and Ivan Nikiforovich file criminal complaints against each other.

### **Tavrishesky Garden appears in The Nose**

Tavrishesky Garden is one of the locations where Kovalev's missing nose is rumored to be strolling around.

### **Dnieper River appears in The Terrible Vengeance**

The Dnieper River is the border line between the Ukraine and Russia. The Dnieper is mentioned in several of the stories.

### **Gadyach appears in Ivan Fyodorovich and His Aunt**

Gadyach is the city in which the narrator, Stepan Kurochka, lives. It is also the city where Ivan goes to high school.



## **Nevsky Prospect appears in Nevsky Prospect**

Nevsky Prospect is a main street in Petersburg. It is a street with many shops, business, entertainment and tourist attractions.

## **B Region appears in The Carriage**

The town of "B" also referred to as the B Region is the village where the brigadier general's quarters and his infantry regiment are relocated transforming the formerly dull and boring town into a lively and colorful place to be.

## **Kolomna appears in The Portrait**

Kolomna is an area of Petersburg whose inhabitants are retirees, students and others who have limited funds. Many moneylenders operate in Kolomna.



# Themes

## Morality

The ill effects of less than stellar morals is one of the driving themes in this collection of short stories by Nikolai Gogol. The sins of lust and greed are main themes in the first short story, "St. John's Eve." In this story, the martyred young boy slain for gold is sheathed in white, symbolic of purity and goodness. In "Night Before Christmas" Gogol references the vanity of the townspeople with a special focus on the very vain town beauty, Oksana. Oksana is humbled when she fears the man she loves is missing. In "The Terrible Vengeance," lust and murder are the sins of Katerina's evil father. He lusts after his own daughter and murders his entire family.

In "Viy," loss of faith is the backdrop of this story. The young philosopher Khoma is destroyed by a witch. His friend concludes that the witch did not kill him but his fear did. He should have spat on her and crossed himself. Making the cross on oneself is symbolic of one's faith. Being afraid of the witch (or evil) is losing faith in God. In "The Story of How Ivan Ivanovich Quarreled with Ivan Nikiforovich" pride and vanity prevent the healing of a rift in a life-long relationship. In the story "Nevsky Prospect," the two main characters run into problems when they lack strength of character to face reality. Their delusional thinking causes both to travel down very dark paths. In "The Carriage," Pythagor's fatal flaw is boastfulness and deceit. In "The Portrait," Chartkov is greedy and vain and seduced by the promise of gold and fame.

A theme within a theme emerges in these thirteen stories. Men are usually tempted by beautiful women who often turn out to hurt them or lead them down wrong paths. It is such a continuous thread running through the stories that one wonders if Gogol might be revealing something about his personal life and experiences.

## Christianity

In "St. John's Eve" townspeople who are Christian speak of "Catholics" with disdain. The Devil who causes misery in the lives of the main characters Petrus and Pidorka loses in the end. Pidorka, who was pure, joins a convent when her husband dies at the hand of the Devil.

In "Night Before Christmas" Gogol refers to everyone going "caroling and glorifying Christ." He talks of the Devil being angry that the town blacksmith is painting religious pictures. Once the blacksmith invokes the Devil's help, the Devil fears that the blacksmith will cross himself. Making the sign of the cross is a direct reference to Christianity. The blacksmith uses this as leverage against the Devil which prevents him taking over his soul. The blacksmith is at first tempted by the Devil but ultimately defeats him, is repentant and continues to paint religious renderings. In "The Terrible



Vengeance," a character refers to a foreign land where there "are not churches of Christ."

Many of the stories speak of devils, witches, sorcerers and wizards, all anti-Christian symbols which are presented at various times as vile, ugly, old, humped-back and with many other unattractive characteristics. For the most part, these evil beings are defeated by good or pious individuals.

## Ukraine Culture

Gogol makes many references to Ukraine culture including references to Ukrainian heroes, foods, religious views, superstitions and customs. For example, in many of the stories the Ukrainian soldiers are described as stooping down to dance the conventional Cossack dance of the time. The Cossacks' uniform is described having a bright blue jacket and hats called astrakhans.

The Russian elite class looked down on the people of the Ukraine. This is illustrated when the Tsarina is visited by a group of Cossacks. She is surprised that they marry, inferring that she did not think they would have normal lives. Most stories feature the wives deferring to their husbands. For example, Danilo does not allow his wife to answer a question from her own father. All questions should go to him.

In many of the stories, Gogol includes "a great beauty" in his litany of characters. This beauty is usually light-skinned, with black hair, brown eyes and black brows. There are quite a few mentions of dark, arched brows being a sign of beauty. A rice dish called kutya appears in many of the stories, probably an expensive mainstay of the towns. At celebrations there is always mention of spiced vodka being served.





# Style

## Point of View

Many of the stories are told by a storyteller. This narrator is typically not described but there are inferences that the individual has personal knowledge of the story and is either a friend or colleague of the principals. The storyteller often addresses the reader as "you would not believe." Gogol effectively brings the reader into the story with such cozy references. This style is essentially the narrative, omniscient point of view which allows the reader insight into each character's reactions and thoughts as the story moves forward. This bird's eye view creates suspense and anticipation of potential conflicts and misunderstandings among the characters.

In *Ivan Fyodorovich Shponka and His Aunt*, Gogol has an unnamed storyteller telling the story told to him by Stepan Ivanovich Kurochka. This layering of storytellers allows the unnamed tale teller to offer the caveat that he could have something wrong, bringing a nuanced mystique to the tale. In *Diary of a Madman* the point of view is first person, the narrator making daily journal entries of his thoughts and feelings. The succession of diary writings serve to illustrate the character's descent into madness. This is not a totally serious story. There are parts of the story that are meant to be funny.

## Setting

The two main geographic settings are in St. Petersburg, Russia and in the Ukraine. The first vignette of stories based in the Ukraine take place largely in farm country, on farmsteads. There is much mention of thick foliage, lush flowers and of fruits and vegetables grown on the farms. There are some episodes that take place in large cities, like at a monastery in Kiev and the Tsarina's Palace in Petersburg, but in the main these stories take place on farmsteads or small towns or villages. In "Viy," a marketplace scene is vividly described with breads, fruits and vegetables for sale by townspeople or farmers.

In "Nevsky Prospect" the title is the name of a famous street in St. Petersburg. It is a gathering place lined with shops, business and other attractions. It is a street that begins with the aroma of baking bread and ends with the elite arriving for dinner. There is something there for everyone, from the beggar looking for a hand-out to the rich and famous looking for some glamor and excitement. Nevsky Prospect is also a stop for tourists from many European countries.

## Language and Meaning

Gogol employs a mixture of style. Influenced by contemporaries of the late 19th century, at times Gogol's style verges on romanticism or even purple prose. Since these stories were written in the 19th century and in the Ukraine, his style is influenced by the



time and culture. The first story, "St. John's Eve" employs descriptive and complicated sentence structure popular style of the era. In other stories, one can see Gogol's style evolve away from rigid literary conventions toward experimental/modern style at times, employing a surrealistic approach.

Gogol uses descriptions for all five senses. He speaks of boots squeaking loudly in the freshly fallen snow in *The Night Before Christmas*. In *Ivan Fyodorovich Shponka and His Aunt*, as Ivan approaches his farmstead one can hear all the dogs growling and barking. One can hear the music celebrating the wedding in *The Terrible Vengeance*. Gogol refers to turkey and lamb cooking for dinner and the smell of spiced vodka. His visual descriptions are rich and detailed in every story. Gogol on more than several occasions employs the use of synaesthesia where one type of sensation evokes the sensation of another. For example, in *Old World Landowners* the narrator says, ". . .if . . .I hear the occasional creaking of a door, it immediately smells of the village to me" an old-fashioned way of saying that "this" reminds me of "that."

As one gets deeply into this collection of short stories, one appreciates Gogol's humor and use of descriptive phrasing to help the reader visualize the characters and objects. He uses phrases like "a nose like a red plum" or "stocky with arms like potatoes growing out of his side." The images are funny and the phrases are effective. The book is a translation from old Russian to English. Although the translation is no doubt excellent, there will always be some meaning lost in translation.

## Structure

"The Collected Tales of Nikolai Gogol are divided into two sets. The "Ukrainian Tales" include: *St. John's Eve*; *The Night Before Christmas*; *The Terrible Vengeance*; *Ivan Fyodorovich and His Aunt*; *Old World Landowners*; *Viy*; and, *The Story of How Ivan Ivanovich Quarreled with Ivan Nikiforovich*. The "Petersburg Tales" include: *Nevsky Prospect*; *The Diary of a Madman*; *The Nose*; *The Portrait*; and, *the Overcoat*.

The titles alone hint at a different style applied to each set. The "Ukrainian Tales" are written earlier and are rich in description and complicated sentence structure. The second set "Petersburg Tales" is written later on in Gogol's career and underscore a transitional style which is noticeably more contemporary and succinct. Gogol employs a device of having multiple storytellers relate the tale. By layering on more than one storyteller it provides the mystique that perhaps some of the details may be incorrect. Gogol is playing with the reader, intimating that there may be missing pieces to the story.

The structure of "Diary of a Madman" is that of an actual diary, everything being conveyed to the reader by diary entries. In "The Nose" Gogol has fun with his readers with this strange tale of a missing nose roaming around by itself. Gogol structures this as a plausible fantasy. At the end of the story, Gogol has the narrator admonish himself. The narrator concludes that this tale could not be real and that it would be an inappropriate subject for an author to even write about.



## Quotes

In this farmstead, a man often appeared, or, better, a devil in human form. (St. John's Eve, p. 5).

Wondrously, the moon shines. (The Night Before Christmas, p. 35).

The poor deacon didn't even dare to show his pain by coughing or grunting when the heavy fellow sat almost on his head and stuck his frozen boots on both sides of his temples. (The Night Before Christmas, p. 37).

He was not one of those old people who make a nuisance of themselves, eternally praising the old days and denouncing the new. (Old World Landowners, p. 135).

And which is stronger in us, passion or habit? (Old World Landowners, p. 152).

Pity never possesses us so strongly as at the sight of beauty touched by the corrupting breath of depravity. Let ugliness make friends with it, but beauty, tender beauty . . . in our thoughts it is only united with chastity and purity. (Nevsky Prospect, p. 254).

But what is strangest, most incomprehensible of all is how authors can choose such subjects . . . I confess, that is utterly inconceivable, it is simply . . . no, no, I utterly fail to understand. (The Nose, p. 325).

And the devil himself lights the lamps only so as to show everything not as it really looks. (Nevsky Prospect, p. 278).

Sit here, and if you still want to call yourself King Ferdinand, I'll beat the wish out of you. (Diary of a Madman, p. 297).

Watch out, brother. You have talent. It would be a sin to ruin it. But you are impatient. Some one thing entices you, some one thing takes your fancy—and you occupy yourself with it. And the rest can go to rot. (The Portrait, p. 345).

Fame cannot give pleasure to one who did not merit it but stole it; it produces a constant tremor only in one who is worthy of it. (The Portrait, p. 368).

Have you lost your mind, fool that you are? One day he takes a job for nothing, and now the evil one gets him to ask more than he's worth himself. (The Overcoat, p. 406).



## Topics for Discussion

In "St. John's Eve," what issues of morality does Gogol focus upon?

In "The Night Before Christmas," what symbolic religious gesture terrorizes the Devil and keeps him from overpowering Valuka?

In "The Old World Landowners," who winds up with the farmstead when Afanasy and Perhkula die and what are the circumstances?

In "The Story of How Ivan Ivanovich Quarreled with Ivan Nikiforovich," what did the two friends quarrel over?

In "Nevsky Prospect," what weak character trait do both main characters, Pirogov and Piskarev, share? Describe how this flaw affects their relationships.

Why is Major Kovalev insulted and angered when the printer asks him if he would like some snuff?

What behaviors cause Chartkov, the artist, to lose his talents?