

The Diary of a Madman, the Government Inspector, and Selected Stories Study Guide

The Diary of a Madman, the Government Inspector, and Selected Stories by Nikolai Gogol

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The Diary of a Madman

The Diary of a Madman Summary

The narrator, who works in a government office, goes to work late. He feels that the other employees are constantly harassing him because they are jealous of his position as the favorite of the director. Having feelings for the director's daughter, one day the narrator spots her walking on the street with her dog. Believing that he hears the dogs talking to one another, the narrator decides he must steal letters the director's daughter's dog has sent to the other dog in order to learn of her true feelings for him. The narrator does this, but finds the letters trite and mostly about their own doggy lives. Later, however, the narrator discovers both through the letters and at the office that the director's daughter is engaged to marry a rich man.

Since he has become fascinated with the saga in Spain in which no direct claimant to the throne has been found, the narrator begins to believe that he is the King of Spain and that he would make a better husband to the director's daughter. The narrator confronts the director's daughter with this information. Soon after, the narrator quits his job at the government office and begins waiting at home for the Spanish deputies to come take him to his rightful throne. When they finally arrive, the narrator is quite excited. However, the Chancellor of State continuously locks him alone in a room every time he insists on calling himself King Ferdinand. The narrator then finds that he does not like the customs of Spain when they shave his head. He feels tortured and prays to be rescued.

The Diary of a Madman Analysis

The reader begins the story with the idea that the narrator of the diary is a madman, but this can mean so many different things. For this reason, the reader may not realize immediately that the narrator truly is insane until he becomes aware that the dogs are speaking in an English he can understand. Slowly the narrator's mental sanity begins to diminish and the reader can watch it happening, watch how a man working a menial job begins to take on fantasies of grandiosity and imagine himself as more than he truly is. For example, the narrator imagines himself indispensable to the director, but in reality he is more than likely just one among many clerks who is called upon with equal degree as the others. However, the narrator not only believes himself indispensable to the director, but imagines himself a suitable suitor to the director's daughter.

As the story continues, the reader begins to see how quickly the narrator's mental stability is failing. The dates on the diary entries become confusing and then simply bizarre. At the same time, the narrator begins to act erratically and call himself King Ferdinand, a situation that lands the narrator in a mental hospital. However, by this point the narrator believes himself to be in Spain in a royal castle, being tortured for unknown

reasons. The reader knows the truth, however, by the description of the torture, and wonders if the poor narrator will ever see his own demise.



The Viy

The Viy Summary

At the seminary in Kieff there are three groups of boys: the rhetoricians, clean cut young men who often sport black eyes; the philosophers, who often imbibe in tobacco and alcohol; and the grammarians, who are often still quite young and act like young children. During school breaks, these students often go off into the woods together, camping under the open sky. One such group that includes a theologian, a rhetorician, and a philosopher named Thomas Brutus becomes lost and continues walking after dark in an attempt to find shelter. They finally come upon a small cluster of homes. However, an old woman comes out and tells them that the houses are all full and there is no room for them. The boys plead their case and finally the old woman relents. While being led to a bed, the theologian steals a fish from a cart in the yard. Thomas Brutus steals the fish from the theologian despite being told by the old woman to be content with what has been offered.

Thomas Brutus goes outside to eat his stolen fish. The old woman finds him. The old woman jumps on Thomas' back and he begins to run. Thomas quickly realizes the old woman is a witch and she has charmed him. Thomas runs and runs until he becomes exhausted. Thomas begins to say prayers and exorcisms. Soon the old woman falls from Thomas' back and he begins to ride on hers. Thomas picks up a stick and beats the old woman. The old woman falls from exhaustion. Suddenly the old woman turns into a beautiful young woman. The next day, Thomas returns to Kieff and quickly puts the adventure out of his mind.

Thomas is called upon at the Seminary to say prayers for a young woman who is expected to die soon. Thomas is taken to the woman's home by a group of Cossacks. When he arrives, Thomas finds the woman's father sick with grief. Someone has attacked his young daughter and caused her death. The father only wants what the girl has asked for and she has asked that Thomas Brutus say prayers over her body for three days after her death. When the father takes Thomas to see the young girl, Thomas is shocked to see that the young girl is the same girl he beat to death in the small village.

Thomas goes to say the prayers the first night and is shocked to find the young girl wake and rise from her coffin. However, the prayers and exorcisms that Thomas says keep her away. After sleeping a time, Thomas hangs out in the kitchen of the main house and listens to stories of witches from the servants of the house. That night the girl again rises from her coffin, but Thomas again keeps her at bay with prayers and exorcisms. On the third night, when the girl rises from her coffin, she calls all the creatures of the night to the old church. The girl then calls the Viy, the king of the trolls. Thomas is so frightened that he dies within his protected circle of prayer and exorcism. The next day, the priest is shocked at the condition of the old church when he finds it



filled with creatures of the night. The church is abandoned and allowed to grow over with vegetation. In town, Thomas' friends continue their youthful indiscretions.

The Viy Analysis

This story begins with a note from the author telling the reader that the story is an old traditional tale that is often told throughout Little Russia. The story is about witches and trolls, creatures of the night that are often talked about and perhaps something that all the people of Little Russia believe in enough to make them somewhat superstitious.

Thomas is a philosopher. The description of the philosophers in the beginning of the story suggests that these are students who do not take their studies as seriously as they ought to and enjoy imbibing in the more chemical aspect of happiness. Thomas is clearly someone who is not fully committed to taking the vows that result in a seminary education, especially when he steals a fish after being told he should be happy with what is offered to him.

Thomas is attacked by a witch who attempts to ride him into exhaustion, bringing on his death as a punishment for stealing. However, Thomas uses his prayers and exorcisms learned in seminary to protect himself and ends up beating the witch to death. However, the witch is not completely done with Thomas and insists that he read prayers over her after her death. The witch knows that Thomas is something of a hypocrite and she plans on getting revenge for his impure heart and actions. The witch finally triumphs when she calls the Viy to Thomas. The moral of this story seems to be that those who do not have a pure heart cannot hide behind prayer and superstition.



The Mysterious Portrait

The Mysterious Portrait Summary

Part 1. An artist called Tchartkoff happens to be passing a little picture shop when he stops and looks at the simple prints. Tchartkoff finds these prints trite and does not understand why so many people are fascinated by them or stop so often to look. However, when Tchartkoff is caught by the proprietor after staring himself for quite some time, he feels guilty. Tchartkoff goes into the store to see if there is anything truly worth buying in the store. Tchartkoff finds a portrait that shows some talent, but appears unfinished. Tchartkoff buys the painting after negotiating a price of twenty kopeks. As Tchartkoff walks home, he realizes that he had spent his last twenty kopeks.

At home Tchartkoff has to wait for his servant to come and open the door. The boy tells Tchartkoff that the landlord came looking for the rent earlier in the day with a police officer. Not only this, but Tchartkoff learns there are no candles to light the dark apartment. Tchartkoff sends the boy off to bed and then laments to himself that his art is not making any money while other artists with less talent seem to be making money in little picture shops. Before Tchartkoff goes to bed, he cleans off the portrait he has purchased. The eyes seem to follow Tchartkoff around the room, so he covers it before he goes to bed. That night Tchartkoff has many dreams in which the man in the portrait comes out of the painting and shows him a great deal of money. In the morning, Tchartkoff immediately checks the painting to be sure the sheet has remained on it all night.

In the morning, the landlord comes again with a constable. Tchartkoff insists he has no money and will pay when he has it. The landlord wants Tchartkoff to move out. The constable walks around the room and looks at Tchartkoff's paintings, suggesting that the landlord take his rent in trade. When the constable touches the portrait, a piece of the frame breaks and a roll of money falls out. Tchartkoff grabs the money before anyone can see it and then tells his landlord he will pay him later and then vacate the apartment. As soon as the landlord and the constable are gone, Tchartkoff counts the money and begins planning what to do with it. At first he thinks of using it to sustain himself until he can improve his talent and begin selling paintings on his own terms. Later, however, Tchartkoff decides to buy a great many clothes, have his hair done, and move into more luxurious apartments.

Tchartkoff pays to have an article done about him and his artwork. The next day a woman brings her daughter to him to have her portrait done. Tchartkoff finds himself influenced by the woman's demands. Between sittings, however, Tchartkoff begins working on a portrait of Psyche on which he uses some of the more realistic techniques he had wanted to use on the girl's portrait. When the woman sees this, she mistakenly believes this is her daughter's portrait and she is greatly pleased. The painting becomes a success and brings Tchartkoff a great deal of business. Soon Tchartkoff is producing portraits like the shoddy work he scorned in the picture shop.



One day Tchartkoff is asked to critique a painting done by a man with whom he had gone to art school. Tchartkoff is so impressed by the talent he sees in the painting that he is filled with envy and rage. Tchartkoff tries to go back and develop his own talent, but he is too ingrained in the more popular styles. Tchartkoff then begins buying great works by great artists and destroying the works. Tchartkoff quickly goes through the fortune he has amassed, becomes ill, and dies.

Part 2. At an auction many bidders are bidding on a mysterious portrait that appears unfinished but has intense eyes that seem to look right at the viewer. A man, a well-known artist, stops the bidding and insists that the painting is his. The man then begins to tell a story. There was once a well-known usurer in the poor section of St. Petersburg known as Kolomna. The man was quiet, had no family and kept to himself. The man was also very generous and seemed to offer good terms. However, stories began to circulate about how taking a loan from this man could change a person and cause him a terrible death. One man changed from a supporter of the arts to a miser and hater of all art. Another man took on a large sum from the usurer to make himself worthy for the woman he loved, but after the wedding he began to beat his wife and one day killed himself after attempting to kill his wife.

The artist's father, a well-known artist in Kolomna, was once approached by the usurer to paint his portrait. Halfway through the portrait, the artist's father refused to finish because he could feel evil flowing from the usurer into the portrait. The portrait was given to the artist afterward. Suddenly the artist's behavior changed and he became jealous of one of his own students. Soon after, however, when another artist took the portrait away, the jealousy vanished and the man returned to his previously kind personality. However, when the man's wife and two of his children died, he felt he had been cursed. The man sent his son to school and joined a monastery. The man went to great lengths to find peace with God and to atone for creating the evil portrait. Then when the artist visited his father at the monastery, he learned a great deal about art and the evil portrait. The son had sworn to search for the evil portrait and to destroy it so that it could not hurt anyone else.

When the artist finished his story, the whole room turned to look at the mysterious portrait. However, while the artist told his story, someone had stolen the portrait away.

The Mysterious Portrait Analysis

This story is divided into two parts. In the first part, the reader learns of a poor artist who was tired of being poor and wanted money to help him support his career until he could fully develop his talent in the way he wants. However, when the artist does come into money, his ambitions quickly change and he finds himself becoming something of a commercial artist, something he scorned at the beginning of the story and swore he would never do.

The money the artist finds that somehow changes his behavior comes from a portrait he found in a picture shop and bought out of compassion for the shop proprietor. The



young artist seems to have an honest and kind disposition at the beginning of the story, but this seems to change with wealth. The reader can assume that this change has come from greed and the accumulation of wealth.

The second part of the story begins with the same portrait the tragic artist in the first part of the story bought and received a great deal of money from. However, the story is quite different. This time the young artist featured in this story tells how his own father, also an artist, created the portrait of a usurer in his neighborhood who seemed to think that by having his portrait done he could live forever. In fact, the father seems to have felt the evil from the usurer entering the portrait through his paint brush. The artist's father is the first victim of the painting, becoming filled with envy and anger that disappears with the painting. The painting is evil and this seems to explain why the artist in the first part of the story changed so dramatically despite his personal desire to become a great artist of his own right.

This story is filled with superstition and the use of strange magic that causes evil to come into people's lives simply by engaging in business with or coming into contact with the portrait of a certain usurer. It is a sad story that suggests in the end that evil continues to exist and is waiting to hurt anyone greedy enough to seek it out.



The Fair for Sorotchinetz

The Fair for Sorotchinetz Summary

Chapter 1. A farmer is taking his wheat and mare to the fair in order to sell them. On the way, a man in a white svitka calls out to the farmer's daughter and implies his desire to marry her. The stepmother of the young girl tells the boy he is not good enough. The boy replies by throwing mud at the stepmother and humiliating her.

Chapter 2. The young man in the white svitka approaches the farmer's daughter in the crowd at the fair and begins to speak to her.

Chapter 3. At the same time, the father is listening to a group of other farmers and merchants who are discussing a wine house at the other end of the fair that is off limits and making it difficult for the men to sell their goods. It is rumored that the wine house is associated with a devil in some way. As the men talk, the father becomes aware that his daughter is speaking with the young boy. The farmer goes to chase the boy off, but then discovers the boy is related to an old friend of the farmer. For this reason, the farmer gives permission for the boy to marry his daughter.

Chapter 4. The farmer tells his wife that he has found a husband for his daughter. However, the stepmother does not approve and forces the farmer to break his word to the young man.

Chapter 5. The young man in the white svitka is angry that the farmer has gone back on his word to allow him to marry the farmer's daughter. The young man strikes up a deal with a friend to force the farmer to change his mind.

Chapter 6. The farmer's wife is having a secret meal with the popovitch. As they sit down to eat, the farmer returns with a group of friends. The farmer's wife makes the popovitch hide in the ceiling among some loose planks of wood.

Chapter 7. The farmers and the merchants have heard a rumor that a piece of the red svitka is to make an appearance soon. In response to questions, someone tells the story of the red svitka. It is said that a devil left Hell and came to the wine house near where the fair is taking place. The devil was wearing a red svitka, gloves, and mittens to hide his identity. After drinking for a long time, the devil left his red svitka with the owner of the wine shop and promised to return. However, after the devil did not return immediately, the owner sold the garment. After a year, the devil comes back for the garment. When he learns it has been sold, he curses it. The owner learns of the curse and tries to destroy it, but cannot. Instead the owner cut it into many pieces and scattered the pieces. It is said the devil has found all the pieces save for the left sleeve.

Chapter 8. In the revelry of the farmer's drunk group, the wood pile is dislodged and the popovitch falls to the floor. The farmer becomes frightened and crawls into the stove and hides with a pot on his head.



Chapter 9. The community becomes frightened because they believe that the farmer has called up the devil by telling his story.

Chapter 10. The farmer and his wife wake in the barn the next morning. The farmer is humiliated, so his wife suggests they quickly sell their mare and wheat so that they can get out of town. However, the farmer discovers the mare is missing. The farmer cries out the theft.

Chapter 11. The farmer finds the red cloth of a svitka in his pocket. This causes the man to panic and run away. The farmer is arrested for stealing a horse. However, the farmer did not steal anyone's horse, he just appears guilty because he ran.

Chapter 12. The man in the white svitka comes to the jail and agrees to have the farmer released if he will allow him to marry his daughter.

Chapter 13. The girl is at the house dreaming of becoming the wife of the man in the white svitka. When her father comes home, the girl is thrilled to learn the wedding is to take place immediately despite her stepmother's protest.

The Fair for Sorotchinetz Analysis

This story uses superstition about the devil to help a young man convince his potential father-in-law into allowing him to marry his beloved. The young man is in love with the beautiful daughter of a farmer, but is deemed unfit for the young girl because he is a peasant. Not only this, but the young man humiliated the girl's stepmother and she has a great deal of say over what happens in the family. Unfortunately for the stepmother, she seems to be having an affair with the son of a pope and this situation is inadvertently revealed to the whole community. Lucky for the stepmother, the farmer had been too drunk to understand what was going on.

The young man uses the story of a devil who supposedly came to the area and is angrily looking for his svitka to trick the farmer into allowing his daughter's marriage. This touches on the superstition and fear common to small communities throughout Russia, especially this section of Little Russia. This also touches on the dynamics of a marriage and the lengths to which a man might go in order to get what he truly desires.



An Evening in May

An Evening in May Summary

Chapter 1. A young man named Levko stops on his way home to visit his beloved, Hana. Hana is young and beautiful and Levko desperately wants to marry her. However, Levko's father refuses to give permission to the young couple to marry. Hana asks Levko to tell her the story of a house that sits near the pond. Levko tells her how a young girl once lived there happily with her father until he remarried. The new stepmother was a witch who disliked the young girl. The young girl ended up killing herself by jumping into the pond. Later, the girl tried to kill the stepmother, but she turned herself into one of the many souls who haunt the pond and she cannot tell which she is.

Chapter 2. Kalenik is on his way home, but he is very drunk and cannot seem to find his house. The young man is complaining about the headman in the village. Kalenik thinks the headman is too heavy handed and that he uses his brief moment with fame to lord over the entire village. The headman has a habit of flirting with the young girls in town even though he lives with a woman he claims is his kinwoman, but many know is really his lover. No one seems to like the headman very much. However, Kalenik annoys a couple of girls enough that they end up sending him to the headman's house in his drunken haze.

Chapter 3. Levko returns to Hana's, but he can hear her speaking with a man in the darkness. Levko moves closer to see who his rival is and is shocked to discover it is the headman, Levko's own father. Angry, Levko gets a group of young men to help him torture the headman.

Chapter 4. The headman is at home with the man who has come to make a distillery out of the abandoned house near the pond. Kalenik comes in as they talk, but the headman just lets him sit at the urging of the distillery man. Then a break is thrown through the window and a group of boys sing a song outside making fun of the headman. The headman rushes out and manages to catch one of the boys, throwing him into a cell in his house. The headman then goes in search of the clerk, only to run into the clerk on the street. The same happened near the clerk's house and he arrested one of the boys. However, the boy the clerk has arrested fits the same description as the one the headman arrested. They go back to the headman's house and find his kinswoman in the cell. They then go to the clerk's and find the kinswoman in that cell as well. The men think she is a witch and start to burn the building down around her, but she gives them a perfectly reasonable explanation as to how she happened to be in the cell.

Chapter 5. Levko is by the pond after the excitement in town, thinking of how his own father has betrayed him with Hana. As Levko sits there, he sees a girl in the window of the abandoned house. The girl asks Levko to show her which of the pond spirits is her



stepmother and she will help him with his problem. Levko picks the woman out easily. The girl gives Levko a letter that he is to give his father.

Chapter 6. The headman and his men come across Levko near the pond. The headman is shocked to see that it is his own son who has caused so much trouble that night. The headman orders Levko arrested, but Levko produces the letter the young girl gave to him. The letter is from the Superintendent of Police and it orders the headman to allow Levko to marry Hana and to repair the bridges in town. Reluctantly the headman agrees and begins to boast how the Superintendent of Police will be having dinner with him at his house.

An Evening in May Analysis

Levko is a young man deeply in love with Hana. Hana appears to love Levko too, but he is surprised to discover that his own father has been trying to steal Hana from him. Levko attempts to get revenge on his father with some brilliant teenage pranks. This seems to work to a certain extent, making his father look like an idiot and causing his lover to finally leave him. However, it still does not solve Levko's biggest problem. In order for anyone to get married in this village, they must have the permission of the headman. However, Levko's father is the headman.

This story, like many of the others, has a spiritual aspect to it. There is a house near the pond in town that is abandoned. This house has a story, like many abandoned houses, and in this story the girl who haunts the house and the pond helps Levko because he helps her with her own problem. In their own way, both Levko and the girl get what they want in the end. Even Levko's father gets something he wants, bragging rights. However, the reader must wonder what will happen when the dinner with the Superintendent of Police does not happen.



Mid-Summer Evening

Mid-Summer Evening Summary

Foma Grigorievitch is a storyteller who never tells the same story twice. Therefore when he hears someone reading a copy of one of his stories that a writer has published, Foma insists it is not the true story and begins to tell the correct story himself. Foma tells a story that his own grandfather once told him of the village where they live. More than a hundred years ago there lived in the town a man called Basavriouk whom everyone came to believe was a devil.

A young man wanted to marry his beloved, but her father would not allow it because the young man, Peter, was not rich enough. One day the girl's young brother, Ivos, went to Peter and told him the girl was promised to marry another man who was much richer. That night Peter went to the local wine house and began to drink away his sorrows. Basavriouk came into the wine house, listened to Peter's troubles, and offered him a solution. Peter was to go with Basavriouk and do all he said without question. He would then have all the money he could need.

Peter followed Basavriouk to a ravine where Basavriouk told him to pick a fern flower at exactly the moment he told him. When Peter did this, a tiny witch appeared out from under a bush. The witch asked Peter if he was willing to do anything for money. Peter said yes. The witch gave Peter a shovel and showed him where to dig. However, when Peter uncovered the chest of money, the chest kept moving deeper into the ground. The witch then presented a young boy and told Peter to kill him. Peter did not want to, but when the witch showed him the wealth of money under the ground, he did. The next morning, Peter boy woke with two large sacks of money beside him.

Peter was allowed to marry his beloved. However, when people asked where he got his riches, Peter could not remember. The girl was happy in her marriage, but missed her little brother who had disappeared the night before her husband found his riches. Then one day, a year after Peter found the money, his wife's brother suddenly showed up at their home. Peter suddenly remembered what he had done to get his wealth. When his wife tried to approach the apparition, it covered itself in blood and then shut the door. When the Cossacks came, there was nothing but a pile of ashes where Peter had stood.

The young wife went away on a long pilgrimage and Basavriouk, who had disappeared in the year in which Peter had become rich, returned.

Mid-Summer Evening Analysis

This story contains many of the same themes as the stories before it. A young man wants to marry the girl of his heart's desire, but the girl's father will not allow it because



the boy is not rich enough. For this reason, the boy makes a pact with the devil and comes into a great deal of money. However, he has to kill to do it.

The twist in this story is that the lovesick boy, Peter, has killed his beloved's brother. The guilt of killing this little boy should have eaten Peter up, but he cannot remember how he got his money. In fact, Peter lives in something like oblivion for the first year of his marriage. However, when the truth comes back to haunt him, Peter turns into a pile of dust. This suggests that Peter has offered his soul in exchange for what he wants and the devil has come to call. This is a common theme in these kinds of stories.



The Carriage

The Carriage Summary

A regiment of the military has come to a sleepy village in South Russia, bringing excitement to the normally boring area. One of the local aristocrats, Tchertokoutski, had once been in the military but was kicked out for an illicit affair. Now Tchertokoutski has befriended the general of the regiment. One night, during a party, Tchertokoutski plays cards with the general and his soldiers. Tchertokoutski brags about a carriage he owns after the general shows him a horse that is the pride of the regiment. The general is so impressed with Tchertokoutski's claims that he asks to see the carriage. Tchertokoutski invites the general and all his men to dinner the following day.

That night Tchertokoutski remains longer than he intended at the general's house and does not get home until very late. In the morning, Tchertokoutski's wife allows him to sleep late into the day because she knows he came home late and wants him to get lots of sleep. However, when Tchertokoutski's wife sees the general and his men driving up the lane toward the house, she panics. Tchertokoutski's wife quickly wakes her husband. Belatedly, Tchertokoutski recalls his invitation to the general and his men for dinner. When he realizes he has nothing to present to them, Tchertokoutski tells the maid to tell the general that he had to go out of town and would not be back until the following day. Tchertokoutski then goes in search of a hiding place, finally choosing to hide inside his prize carriage.

The general is disappointed to learn that Tchertokoutski is not at home. However, the general asks if he and his men can see the carriage Tchertokoutski bragged about so heartily the day before. The general and his men look at the outside of the carriage but are not impressed with it. The general asks to see the inside. When the door opens, the general and his men discover Tchertokoutski hiding inside. The general says hello, then covers Tchertokoutski up again and walks away.

The Carriage Analysis

Tchertokoutski is a braggart who is constantly getting himself in trouble with his lack of self-control. Tchertokoutski was kicked out of the military for having too many illicit affairs, then married a wealthy woman who made him something of an aristocrat. This has not put an end to Tchertokoutski's outrageous behavior, however. In this story, Tchertokoutski makes a fool of himself by bragging about a carriage and then forgetting about it.

This story is different from the others in that it does not include any type of magic or superstition. However, it does have something in common with the first story in that it is a story about a man who sees himself in a way that no one else does. Tchertokoutski thinks he is an aristocrat, but when the general finds him in the carriage it is revealed

that Tchertokoutski is just a common man who wants to be something more than what he really is.



Characters

Narrator from *The Diary of a Madman*

The narrator from *The Diary of a Madman* calls himself several different names throughout the story, but the reader cannot assume that any of these names are truly his own. The man is a clerk in a government office who is quickly going insane. In fact, this man comes to believe that dogs can speak English, that they write letters to one another, and that he can find out if his beloved loves him by reading the dog's letters. Later still, the narrator begins to call himself King Ferdinand after becoming obsessed with the idea that he is the long lost heir to the Spanish throne.

The diary the narrator writes in this novel is filled with inconsistencies, odd dates and language, and other things that allow the reader to watch as this man quickly goes insane. At the beginning, however, he seems like just a lazy clerk who has the favor of his boss for an unknown reason. The reader quickly sees that this is simply a figment of the man's imagination. Later, the man is placed in a mental facility, more than likely because of his odd behavior at the office and his attempts to convince the woman he loves that she should marry him. It is a fascinating look at the decline of one man's sanity.

Thomas Brutus from *The Viy*

Thomas Brutus is an interesting character because he is a deeply flawed man. Thomas Brutus is a philosophy student at a seminary in Kieff. During his off time from school, Thomas and his friends often go off into the country alone, dependent on the kindness of the inhabitants of the farms and villages in the area to sustain them because they are seminary students. However, when Thomas runs into one old woman who will not feed him simply because he is a seminary student, Thomas steals. This woman proves to be a witch and she attempts to punish Thomas, but Thomas falls back on his prayers and exorcisms to stop her.

Thomas is a hypocrite because he only uses what he has learned in seminary school when it suits his needs. Thomas does not, however, keep true to these ideals when he wants something. For this reason, the witch seeks him out and tries to punish him, but eventually has to call upon the Viy to do her dirty work. Thomas is eventually punished for his hypocrisy, but this does nothing to stop Thomas' friends who live with the same hypocrisy.

Tchartkoff from *The Mysterious Portrait*

Tchartkoff is a kind, gentle painter. Tchartkoff believes that art should be pure and not commercialized as some artists in his time have begun to do. In fact, Tchartkoff does not like that the local picture shops seem to promote copies and artists who do not have



great talent. For this reason, Tchartkoff is intent on trying to develop his own talent and become a talented, original artist and not a commercial artist.

Unfortunately, Tchartkoff suffers from a lack of money and finds himself struggling to pay simple things like the rent. When Tchartkoff buys a strange portrait from a picture shop, he is surprised when the portrait haunts him and causes him to dream of money. The next day, Tchartkoff is shocked to find a large amount of money hidden in the portrait. This money should give Tchartkoff the means to develop his talent, but instead his greed leads him to living beyond his means and creating essentially commercial portraits to pay for it. Tchartkoff eventually dies of envy when he realizes what he has done.

Usurer from The Mysterious Portrait

A usurer is a lender of money who often charges large amounts of interest. In this story, the usurer does not have a name, but he gives loans to people at reasonable rates. However, these loans come with a price that most of the borrowers do not anticipate. The money causes these people to become dark, filled with anger and envy. At the same time, many of these people die from horrible deaths.

When the usurer realizes that he is dying, he wants a portrait of him completed so that he might continue to live on. An artist agrees to do this, but before the portrait is done he can sense the evil and he stops. However, while the artist possesses the painting, he is filled with dark envy and anger. Later, the artist loses his wife and two children and comes to believe it is because he painted the portrait. For this reason the artist goes into a monastery and asks his son to find the portrait and destroy it.

Solopi Tcherevik from The Fair of Sorotchinetz

Solopi Tcherevik is a farmer. In The Fair of Sorotchinetz, Tcherevik takes his wife and daughter to a fair where he hopes to sell wheat and a mare. However, stories abound throughout the fair that the wheat will not sell because of stories about a wine house where a devil once visited. Tcherevik believes these stories and this leaves him vulnerable for a young suitor for his daughter's hand to take advantage and use the story to convince Tcherevik to allow him to marry his daughter. Tcherevik's wife is against this marriage, but she has her own problems with fidelity. In the end the marriage takes place, but the author leaves the reader with the feeling that it makes no difference because they will never be truly happy.

Levko from An Evening in May

Levko is a young Cossack who lives in a small village in Little Russia. Levko is in love with a local girl, but cannot get permission from the headman, who happens to be his father, to marry her. Levko learns one night that his father is attempting to seduce his beloved. For this reason, Levko raises havoc against his father, but this does not solve



his problem. However, when Levko helps a young spirit find her stepmother, Levko is given the means by which his father will be forced to allow him to marry.

Headman from An Evening in May

The headman in a Little Russia village is the man who works for the government assuring that the rules are followed and crime is kept under control. The headman is something like a mayor in an American city. In this story, the headman is a man who once had a brush with glory when he was chosen to escort Czarina Catherine. However, this was long ago and the stories no longer impress the people.

The headman is unmarried, but he has a woman living with him whom he claims is a relative, a kinswoman, but is really his lover. At the same time, the headman has a reputation for going after the young girls in the village, angering many of the young men in the village. For this reason, many in the village do not like the headman. The headman is also pursuing Hana, his own son's girlfriend, causing friction between him and his son.

Peter from A Midsummer Evening

Peter is a young man who is deeply in love with a young girl in his village whom he has known all his life. Unfortunately, the girl's father refuses to let Peter marry her because he is not rich enough. For this reason, Peter decides to go to any length to get the money he needs. Peter gets the money but cannot remember how. A year later, a ghost appears in Peter's house and he suddenly remembers how he got the money just seconds before he turns to ash.

Ivos from A Midsummer Evening

Ivos is the young brother of Peter's beloved in A Mid-Summer Evening. Ivos is very much loved by his sister and he loves her too. However, on the night that Peter realizes he needs money, he does not hesitate to kill Ivos for an evil witch. Peter does not recall that this is how he got the money, but the truth is revealed to him a year later when Ivos' ghost appears in Peter's home.

Tchertokoutski from The Carriage

Tchertokoutski is an aristocrat who married into his money. On his own, Tchertokoutski is a braggart and a cheat, but with his money his true character is somewhat hidden. In this story, Tchertokoutski actually reveals his true character when he invites a full regiment of soldiers to his house for dinner, but then forgets about the invitation and the purpose behind it. When Tchertokoutski is found out, he is humiliated.



Objects/Places

Diary from The Diary of a Madman

The diary in *The Diary of a Madman* reveals the quickly diminishing sanity on the part of the narrator.

Letters from The Diary of a Madman

The narrator in *The Diary of a Madman* steals letters that he believes one dog wrote to another. The narrator hopes to learn the true feelings of his beloved in the letters.

Church from The Viy

The body of the young woman is taken to a church that was clearly abandoned years before. It is here that Thomas Brutus must read prayers over her for three nights. It is also here where the Viy comes and kills Thomas.

Fish from The Viy

Thomas steals a fish from one of his companions who in turn had stolen the fish from a witch. This is the reason the witch attempts to punish Thomas.

The Portrait from The Mysterious Portrait

Artist Tchartkoff buys a portrait that appears only partially finished from a picture house. The frame of the portrait contains money that changes Tchartkoff's life. However, this money comes with a price. The reader later learns the portrait is of a mysterious usurer.

Portrait of Psyche from The Mysterious Portrait

A portrait of Psyche causes great fame for artist Tchartkoff that leads to him becoming quite wealthy. However, this also causes Tchartkoff to become something of a commercial artist.

Red Svitka from The Fair for Sorotchinetz

The red svitka is a caftan that is rumored to belong to a devil. The devil had left the svitka as payment at a wine house and the owner quickly sold the svitka to a man who chopped it into many pieces and buried them in many different places. The rumors of



this svitka frighten the people at the fair and causes one man to commit his daughter in marriage to another man.

House on the Pond from An Evening in May

There is a house near the pond in the small village that is the setting of An Evening in May. This house is rumored to be the home of a young girl who committed suicide by jumping into the pond because of her witch of a stepmother. The young girl still haunts the area in an attempt to find her stepmother and punish her for her actions.

Brick from An Evening in May

Levko and his friends throw a brick through the window of the headman's house out of outrage for the headman's attempts to seduce the village's young girls.

Money from Mid-Summer Evening

Peter needs money in order to marry his beloved. Peter receives this money by making a deal with an evil witch and a devil, as well as by murdering an innocent young boy.

Carriage from The Carriage

Tchertokoutski brags about his luxurious carriage to the general of a regimen that has come to his village. However, Tchertokoutski forgets his promise to show this carriage to the general and is caught in a humiliating lie.

Little Russia from All

Most of the stories in this novel take place in Little Russia. This is a Russian term that refers to the area that is known in modern terms as Ukraine.



Themes

Superstition

Many of the stories in this collection include some kind of superstition or magic that is not common in modern lives. The stories mostly take place in Little Russia in a time before modern times. This lends some authenticity to the claims of devils and magic in the stories.

In *The Viy*, the main character killed a witch by using exorcism and prayers on her. This witch is very powerful, however, and she is able to come back from the dead and call forth the *Viy*, the king of the trolls, in order to kill this man. In *The Fair of Sorotchinetz* the father so believes stories of a devil who is searching for his red *svitka* that he allows himself to be manipulated. In *Mid-Summer Evening*, a witch uses her powers to force a young man to kill his young brother-in-law for some money.

Superstition is a common theme in many stories that take place before the twentieth century. For this reason, the author of this book uses a great many stories that are traditional in his country to create short stories for his book making superstition is a major theme.

Longing

In this book many of the stories have a character who deeply longs to marry the girl of his dreams. However, there always seems to be an obstacle in his or her way. In *The Fair of Sorotchinetz*, the young man in the white *svitka* is so disappointed at his beloved's father's change of mind, that he uses trickery to convince him to allow them to marry. In *An Evening in May*, the hero of the story discovers that his father will not allow him to marry his beloved because the father wants the girl for himself. In *Mid-Summer Evening*, the poor lovesick young man sells his soul to the devil in order to achieve his heart's desire.

There are other types of longing in these stories as well. In *The Carriage*, *Tchertokoutski* so badly wants to be seen as an aristocrat that he brags about a carriage he supposedly owns and then forgets about his promise to show the carriage, causing himself humiliation. In *The Mysterious Portrait*, *Tchartkoff* wants so badly to be a good artist that he loses sight of his original intentions and becomes something he once scoffed at.

In these stories, longing proves to be a powerful motivator that makes many of the characters do things they would never have done before. These outcomes demonstrate longing as a theme of the book.



Self-Deceit

In this book, there are two stories in which the main character strives in some way to deceive himself. In *The Diary of a Madman*, the narrator is so convinced that he is a perfect clerk, preferable to all others, and a perfect suitor for the director's daughter that he cannot see how quickly his sanity is waning. In fact, the narrator of this story manages to deceive himself so completely that he does not realize when he ends his story inside a mental institution.

In *The Carriage*, the main character Tchertokoutski is so convinced that he is an aristocrat, a sophisticated person, that he sets himself up for complete humiliation. Tchertokoutski truly believes that he owns the best carriage in the area and that he is better than all those around him. For Tchertokoutski, the end of his self-deceit is a sudden and horrifying moment.

Others in these stories also seek to practice self-deceit for various reasons. In *The Fair of Sorochinetz*, the farmer manages not to see that his wife is having an affair or that his daughter is in on the scheme to convince him to allow her to marry. In *An Evening in May*, Levko has no clue that his father is trying to seduce his beloved until he sees it for himself even though he must be aware of the rumors in town that the headman is always hitting on the young girls. These manifestations of self-deceit and those mentioned before show this is a major theme of the book.

Style

Point of View

Most of the stories in this book are told in the third person point of view with the exception of *The Diary of a Madman* and parts of *Mid-Summer Evening*. *The Diary of a Madman* is written in the first person point of view while *Mid-Summer Evening* begins in the first person point of view of the author himself.

The points of view of the stories work well with each story because they allow the continuation of a sense begun early in the book of a kindly storyteller telling stories around an open fire. *The Diary of a Madman* sticks out among the other stories because it is told in the first person point of view and is written in a diary style, but its point of view is so compelling in the story the author is trying to tell that it should stick out among the others. The third person point of view in the other stories works because many of the stories are set in a time hundreds of years in the past and this third person point of view allows the reader to see the fairy tale capsuled in a modern day short story collection.

Setting

All the stories in this collection are set in what the author refers to as Little Russia. Little Russia is a term in Russia that refers to what is modern day Ukraine. While the first story, *The Diary of a Madman*, and the beginning of *Mid-Summer Evening*, take place in modern times, the rest of the stories take place in the past, most as far past as several hundred years while *The Mysterious Portrait* appears to take place less than a hundred years ago.

The setting of these stories is unique because they are all set in Little Russia, a place that is rich in history and tradition. Many of these stories take full advantage of that history and tradition, injecting into the plots of the stories the longing and superstition that was common in the people living in that time period. The use of the same setting for all the stories allows a sense of continuity to the reader that connects the stories and creates an enjoyable reading experience.

Language and Meaning

The language of these stories moves between a simple, peasant type dialogue to a more formal language. The author is Russian and the stories all take place in Ukraine; therefore, some of the syntax of the sentences might be unfamiliar to modern readers. The author also injects quite a few words that may be unfamiliar to the modern reader, some words that are in Russian and some words that are not in common use in the United States. However, many of these words are explained either in the text or with footnotes throughout the book.



The language of this book works with the stories because the stories are set in Ukraine or Little Russia and the language reflects what the reader would assume such characters would speak. While the characters are often not highly educated and would normally be speaking in Russian, the author has done a good job of reflecting their common dialogue while also using more sophisticated words in his descriptions and narration. The language of the novel works well with the characters and the plot.

Structure

The book is divided into seven short stories. Each story contains its own plot and is divided in its own specific way. The author has used many techniques in telling his story, from using the first person entries of a diary to describing word for word a story told to him by a storyteller. The author tells most of his stories in a linear fashion that keeps the reader from growing confused by a great deal of back story.

Each of the stories in this book has its own unique plot. The Mysterious Portrait has two separate plots that work off of one another, but the author has cleverly left these stories completely separated, nearly creating two separate stories. The Diary of a Madman uses diary entries to show the quickly diminishing sanity of the narrator while Mid-Summer Evening tells a story that the reader can imagine changes slightly with each retelling by the original storyteller. Each of the stories comes to a satisfying conclusion at its end.



Quotes

"Mother, mother, have pity on your sick child! And do you know that the Bey of Algiers has a wart under his nose?"

The Diary of a Madman, pg. 19

"The 'rhetoricians' walked in a more orderly way. Their clothes were generally untorn, but on the other hand their faces were often strangely decorated; one had a black eye, and the lips of another resembled a single blister, etc."

The Viy, pg. 20

"He trod heavily and stumbled at every step. His eyelids were of enormous length. With terror, Thomas saw that his face was of iron."

The Viy, pg. 49

"It did not seem remarkable to him that the Russian populace should gaze with rapture upon 'Eruslanoff Lazarevitch,' on 'The Glutton' and 'The carouser,' on 'Thoma and Erema.' The delineations of these subjects were easily intelligible to the masses."

The Mysterious Portrait, pg. 51

"Three catastrophes which occurred afterwards, three sudden deaths of wife, daughter, and infant son, he regarded as a divine punishment on him and firmly resolved to withdraw from the world."

The Mysterious Portrait, pg. 89

"Danger gave strength to our hero."

The Fair of Sorotchinetz, pg. 102

"Weariness takes possession of him, and sadness; and happiness he cannot find."

The Fair of Sorotchinetz, pg. 112

"It was an hour when, weary with work and the cares of the day, young men and maidens met in noisy groups beneath the splendor of the limpid evening, giving utterance to their happiness in songs that are always touched with melancholy; and the mysterious evening, too, was enveloping the bright day in melancholy, drowning everything in vague distance."

An Evening in May, pg. 113

"Her head was resting on her hand; her cheeks were softly red; her lips moved, murmuring the name of Levko."

An Evening in May, pg. 137



"Now, when a young man and maiden live side by side, you know what happens."
Mid-Summer Evening, pg. 142

"Laugh at it, laugh at it, if you want to! But our grandparents were a long way from laughing; in spite of the fact that Father Athanasius traversed the streets of the village, sprinkling them with holy water, my great aunt said that often, when night came, something knocked upon the roof or scratched against the walls of her dwelling."
Mid-Summer Evening, pg. 152

"Tchertokoutski, his eyes staring out of his head, remained motionless for some moments as though a thunderbolt had struck him."
The Carriage, pg. 162



Topics for Discussion

Who is the narrator in *The Diary of a Madman*? Why does he think he does not have to report to work at the same time as the others? Who does the narrator see on the street one morning? Why does the narrator become fascinated with two dogs on the street? What does the narrator steal from one of the dogs' houses? Who does the narrator come to believe he is? For what reason? Where is the narrator taken at the end of the story? Where does the narrator believe he is? Where is he really?

What is the *Viy*? What does the author's note at the beginning of the story tell the reader about the *Viy*? Who is Thomas Brutus? Where does he meet a strange old woman? Why does the old woman ride on Thomas' back? How does Thomas get the old woman off of him? Why does he beat her? Who does the old woman turn out to be? What happens when Thomas reads prayers over a young girl? Why? What does the end of the story imply about Thomas and his friends?

In *The Mysterious Portrait*, why does Tchartkoff buy the strange portrait? What do his dreams the first night he has the portrait imply? Where does Tchartkoff find the money to move out of his apartment? What does he use this money on? What should he have used the money on? Why does Tchartkoff become jealous of other artists even though he has become quite rich? Where does the reader later learn the mysterious portrait came from? Who does it portray? Why is it unfinished?

Why is the farmer going to the fair in *The Fair of Sorotchinetz*? Why does the farmer's wife not like the young man in the white *svitka*? What does the boy in the white *svitka* want from the farmer? Why does the farmer initially say yes and later say no? What does the boy do about this? What is the red *svitka*? Why does this scare the farmer when he finds red cloth in his pocket?

In *An Evening in May*, why can Levko not marry Hana? What story does Levko tell Hana while they are together one night? Who does Levko find with Hana later that night? How does the reader learn the relationship between these two men? What does Levko do in reaction to this? How does Levko finally convince the headman to allow him to marry Hana? How does Hana respond to this?

In *Mid-Summer Evening*, why does Peter need money? Where does he get it? Why can Peter not remember later where he got his money? What happens when the ghost of Ivos comes to see Peter? What happens to Peter's wife? Who do the people of the village think is responsible for what happened to Peter? Is he?

In *The Carriage*, why does Tchartkoff make such claims about his carriage? Are these claims real? Why does Tchartkoff forget that he invited the general and his men to dinner? How does Tchartkoff react when his guests arrive without a meal to eat? Why does he hide in the carriage house? What happens when the general finds him? Why?