The Overcoat Study Guide

The Overcoat by Nikolai Gogol

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

One of the most influential short stories ever written, Nikolai Gogol's "The Overcoat" ("Shinel") first appeared in 1842 as part of a four-volume publication of its author's *Collected Works (Sochinenya)*. The story is considered not only an early masterpiece of Russian Naturalism—a movement that would dominate the country's literature for generations—but a progenitor of the modern short story form itself. "We all came out from under Gogol's 'Overcoat'" is a remark that has been variously attributed to Dostoevsky and Turgenev. That either or both might have said it is an indication of the far-reaching significance of Gogol's work.

Gogol's writings have been seen as a bridge between the genres of romanticism and realism in Russian literature. Progressive critics of his day praised Gogol for grounding his prose fictions in the everyday lives of ordinary people, and they claimed him as a pioneer of a new "naturalist" aesthetic. Yet, Gogol viewed his work in a more conservative light, and his writing seems to incorporate as much fantasy and folklore as realistic detail. "The Overcoat," which was written sporadically over several years during a self-imposed exile in Geneva and Rome, is a particularly dazzling amalgam of these seemingly disparate tendencies in Gogol's writing. The story begins by taking its readers through the mundane and alienating world of a bureaucratic office in St. Petersburg where an awkward, impoverished clerk must scrimp and save in order to afford a badly needed new winter coat. As the story progresses, we enter a fairy-tale world of supernatural revenge, where the clerk's corpse is seen wandering city streets ripping coats off the backs of passersby. Gogol's story is both comic and horrific— at once a scathing social satire, moralistic fable, and psychological study.

Author Biography

Nikolai Vasilievich Gogol-Yanovski (who later dropped the second part of his hyphenated name) was born in Russia in 1809. He was by all accounts a driven, moody individual. Extremely sensitive to the opinions of others, he could be crushed by the slightest negative criticism and then swell with confidence from positive feedback. Yet he was most strongly motivated, it seems, by his own search for spiritual meaning.

Gogol aspired to become a civil servant. At age 19 in 1828 he left his widowed mother on his family's modest farm in the Ukraine and made the journey to St. Petersburg in search of a government job. He found one in ten months, but by then young Gogol was already disenchanted with public service and set on pursuing a literary career. Using money from his mother and a pseudonym, Gogol arranged to publish a long poem ("Hans Kuechelgarten") he had written in the then popular German Romantic style. When the poem received only two reviews, both unfavorable, Gogol promptly burned all remaining copies and fled to Germany with still more of his mother's money.

He fared better on his return to St. Petersburg six months later, when he began writing a volume of comic folktales set in his native Ukraine.*Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka (Vechore na khutore bliz Dikanki)* was published in 1831 and immediately won acclaim for its young author, bringing him to the attention of celebrated poet Alexander Pushkin and influential critic Vissarion Belinsky. With encouragement from his two new literary mentors, Gogol began the most productive period of his life. From 1831 to 1836 he wrote two highly successful collections of stories, *Mirgorod* and *Arabeski*, and a play, *The Government Inspector* or *Revizor*, which has come to be seen as one of the greatest comedies ever written for the Russian stage.

Public reaction to *The Government Inspector* after its 1836 premier, however, apparently sent Gogol on another downward spin. Initial reviews of the play—in which the central character is a drifter who is mistaken for a government inspector by the residents of a provincial town and showered with bribes until the real official arrives—were in fact mostly favorable, though some expressed offense at the prevalence of dishonest characters. Czar Nicholas I himself attended the premier and was so delighted that he ordered his ministers to see it. Even with the Czar's blessing, however, Gogol felt threatened enough to flee the country again, this time for nearly twelve years.

During this second self-imposed exile, Gogol began writing an epic novel, *Dead Souls (Mertvye dushi)*, which was to be his *magnum opus*—a sweeping portrait of the whole of Russia. In 1842, Gogol published a first volume of *Dead Souls*, as well as a four-volume edition of his *Collected Works (Sochinenya)* in which his famous story "The Overcoat" made its first appearance.

By this time, however, Gogol seemed to be facing an intensifying spiritual crisis. He became obsessed with the notion that the second volume of *Dead Souls* must accomplish nothing less than the moral regeneration of the Russian people. He returned to Russia in 1848, still unsatisfied with his great work and increasingly uncertain of his

abilities. In 1852, already weakened by long hours of work, he embarked upon a particularly severe fast for Lent, hoping to achieve spiritual cleansing. The result was that Gogol fell into a coma and died four weeks before his forty-third birthday. Just ten days earlier, he had burned the only existing manuscript of the second volume of *Dead Souls* in his fireplace.

Plot Summary

"The Overcoat" is the story of Akaky Akakievich Bashmachkin, an impoverished clerk who has toiled for a number of years in an unspecified department within the huge government bureaucracy in St. Petersburg. The tale is told by an unnamed narrator with a tendency to digress and editorialize. Critics have disagreed about how closely the narrator should be identified with Gogol and about how much sympathy the author intended his readers to feel for Akaky the clerk. In any case, the tone of the narration is at various times condescending, compassionate, humorous and nightmarish.

The narrator begins with a fairly thorough introduction of the story's main character, including a broadly comic aside on the origin of his name (which bears a similarity to the common childhood term for feces, "kaka"). We learn that Akaky is zealously devoted to the tedious, low-level work of a copyist and that he has been passed over for promotion because the prospect of being given even the simplest editorial responsibility overwhelms him with fear. Akaky's office-mates make fun of him relentlessly, a situation he usually accepts without a word, preferring to carry on as if nothing were happening. In a passage often cited to illustrate the story's thematic concern with compassion and the universal brotherhood of mankind, the narrator describes how one of Akaky's rare outbursts in response to the constant teasing—"Leave me alone! Why do you insult me?"—affects one of his coworkers:

[T]here was something touching in [Akaky's] words and in the voice in which they were uttered. There was a note in it of something that aroused compassion, so that one young man, new to the office, who, following the example of the rest, had allowed himself to tease him, suddenly stopped as though cut to the heart, and from that time on, everything was, as it were, changed and appeared in a different light to him. Some unseen force seemed to repel him from the companions with whom he had become acquainted because he thought they were well-bred and decent men. And long afterward, during moments of the greatest gaiety, the figure of the humble little clerk with a bald patch on his head appeared before him with his heart-rending words: "Leave me alone! Why do you insult me?" and with those moving words he heard others: "I am your brother." (Excerpt from "The Overcoat," translated by Constance Garnett)

The plot of "The Overcoat" does not really begin to move forward until some four pages into the story, when it is revealed that Akaky's old and threadbare overcoat, no longer able to withstand St. Petersburg's viciously cold winters, must be replaced. The local tailor, Petrovich, convinces the reluctant Akaky that his old coat is beyond repair and begins making a very modest new one for him. Akaky must undergo severe deprivations in order to save enough money for the coat, and the process ends up taking months. When Akaky finally arrives in his office wearing the new coat, the entire department notices and his coworkers half-mockingly insist on a celebration in his honor. Akaky is embarrassed but also proud, and he accepts an invitation to a party given by his superior that evening. Akaky happily wears his new coat to the occasion but feels out of place at the party—though he enjoys himself somewhat after his coworkers cajole him into getting a little drunk.

At the night's end, however, on his walk back to his own less affluent neighborhood, Akaky is assaulted by a band of ruffians who steal the new coat right off his back. The incident occurs right in front of a policeman, who does nothing and claims that he assumed Akaky's assailants were simply his friends.

From this point on, Akaky begins to deteriorate rapidly. In trying to report the crime and seek restitution, he asserts himself and "for the first time in his life trie[s] to show the strength of his character." Yet, his efforts go nowhere and he receives no real help from those around him. A police commissioner even casts suspicion on Akaky by asking what he was doing out so late at night in the first place. Akaky misses work for the first time, and though his coworkers take up a collection to buy him a replacement coat, they only manage to raise a trifling sum. Finally, Akaky finds the courage to ask for assistance from a relatively high-level bureaucrat, referred to by the narrator as "the Person of Consequence." This man, however, proves to be petty and arrogant, and, instead of helping, he lectures Akaky on the importance of going through the proper bureaucratic channels. Akaky, unable to withstand the "severe reprimand" he receives, faints immediately and the next day falls ill. With no apparent hope of recovering either his overcoat or his dignity, he becomes delirious and dies within a few days.

In its final pages, as the narrator himself points out, "our little story unexpectedly finishes with a fantastic ending." Akaky's corpse is seen wandering in various neighborhoods of St. Petersburg stealing overcoats off the backs of passersby. As the corpse eludes policemen, panicky rumors spread until the corpse eventually confronts and steals an overcoat from the "Person of Consequence." Greatly disturbed by the incident, the "Person of Consequence" runs directly home to his family vowing to practice better morals, and begins to treat his underlings with a little more consideration. The supernatural revenge complete, the story returns to the realm of reality with the images in its closing paragraph, in which a policeman witnesses another assault. This time, however, the assailant—who escapes into the night—is too tall to have been the avenging corpse and fits more closely the description of the man who had stolen Akaky's coat.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

The first few pages of Gogol's story are devoted to a detailed description of the main character, a clerk named Arkaky Shoenik. Arkaky, we learn, works in a government office – but the narrator refuses to say which department he works in because he says that government officials are petty and paranoid about things that are written about them. Physically Arkaky is described as a balding middle-aged man with a "pockmarked" face and a "hemorrhoidal" complexion. He is also described as a person who is and will always be in a boring but steady job.

Gogol then tells the reader a funny anecdote about how Arkaky got his name. Gogol explains that Arkaky was named after his father, which made his patronym (a Russian tradition in which men are referred to by both their and their fathers' names) Arkaky Arkakievich, which was somewhat awkward. He explains however that any other name would have been "unthinkable": at his birth, the reader is told, Arkaky's mother arranged for the godparents to pick names at random out of a calendar. The names chosen were so horribly long and complicated that his mother decided on the name Arkaky. Gogol adds that baby Arkaky looked grumpy at his own christening, perhaps because he suspected he might "become a ninth class clerk."

Gogol explains that Arkaky had been a clerk for a long time, and that many different managers had come and gone during his time there. Arkaky is described as a target of contempt and derision from coworkers, but that for the most part he ignored their abuse. Only when they interrupted his work, he protested with cries that haunted his coworkers. Gogol notes that one other clerk in particular was very moved by Arkaky's protests and he viewed them as a commentary on the cruelty of mankind.

Arkaky's work consists of copying documents presented to him by hand. He is presented as a simple man who has no interest in progressing beyond his current level of work – in fact, he has reportedly had a bad experience trying to do a job that involved somewhat more thought and creativity. Arkaky's clothes are also described as a subject of humor for his coworkers, particularly his "frock coat" (an outer coat common in the nineteenth century). This coat was old and had been patched many times, but Arkaky is said not to have noticed its disreputable state. Instead, says Gogol, Arkaky walked through life seeing his copying rather than the world around him, even copying all even for entertainment. An amusing aspect of Arkaky's character is that he frequently has dust or garbage thrown on him in the street because he is not paying attention.

Gogol then elaborates on Arkaky's lack of a social life, noting that Arkaky never even considered the idea of going to parties of celebrations. His life, says Gogol, may have gone on forever in the same pattern if not for "the various disasters, which are scattered along life's paths."

He then notes that the biggest enemy of a clerk who earns 400 rubles a year is the Petersburg cold winter. He adds that clerks like Arkaky are rarely able to afford warm clothes and have to rush around to avoid being chilled. Arkaky has noticed this cold, and he finally realizes that his frock coat has become transparent. His frock coat, the reader is told, had "been a butt of clerks' jokes" because of its changing appearance and general ugliness.

Arkaky decides to try to have a tailor named Petrovich patch the coat. Petrovich and his wife are not described in detail, although Arkaky has used the tailor's services before. Arkaky hopes to find Petrovich drunk so that he can negotiate a good price, but Petrovich is sober and angry. Gogol explains that Arkaky does not speak well and sometimes forgets what he meant to say. Petrovich finally grabs the coat and examines it. He announces that the coat cannot be fixed. Arkaky protests, but Petrovich insists t there is nothing to be done to patch the old coat. He tells Arkaky that he must get a new overcoat made.

Arkaky becomes frightened because he knows he does not have the money for a new overcoat. Petrovich tells him it will cost 150 rubles, and Arkaky becomes agitated. Arkaky finally leaves and wanders in a confused state. He finally decides that he has asked Petrovich at the wrong time and decides to try again later, even trying to bribe Petrovich with alcohol. Petrovich, however, drinks the alcohol and stands firm on the issue of the new coat.

Arkaky finally accepts the need for a new coat. A quick mental inventory of his cash shows that all of his extra cash has been promised to new clothes, and that he simply could not pull together enough rubles for an overcoat. He takes comfort, however, in his knowledge that Petrovich always quotes prices too high and that he will actually make a new overcoat for just 80 rubles. He figures out that he could get half of that amount, but wonders where he will find the rest.

Gogol then tells the reader that Arkaky's life savings are 40 rubles, gathered over the years with an interesting method of saving money. To get the rest of the money Arkaky decides to cut back on virtually all of his other expenses, including not using candles at night, for an entire year. He follows through on his plan and quickly becomes accustomed to his new thrifty lifestyle. Gogol tells the reader that Arkaky endures the loss of his regular comforts by thinking about how wonderful his new overcoat will be. He adds that the thought of this new coat has actually made Arkaky "more alive" with something actually to which to look forward.

Arkaky's suffering is not quite a whole year, thanks to a generous gift from his supervisor. Once he has enough money, he and Petrovich set out to buy materials for the coat. Gogol describes the different materials chosen, and how Arkaky and Petrovich have collaborated for months to pick each one for its quality and appearance.

At last, Petrovich brings Arkaky the new overcoat just before work one day. It is described as a wonderful occasion, with Petrovich treating Arkaky like a king as he dresses him in the new overcoat. Petrovich also mentions that Arkaky is lucky to have

gotten the coat so cheaply. Petrovich follows him to work and even cuts through an alley to get another look at the coat. Arkaky is described as happy and thrilled as he walks to work, and does not even notice the cold.

As he arrived at work, his coworkers are soon there to see his new coat. Arkaky soon becomes embarrassed and does not know what to do when they tell him he should have a party to celebrate. Finally, a higher-level clerk offers to host a party, and Arkaky finds himself being encouraged to come. Arkaky soon becomes pleased at the thought of the party, and looks forward to it. After dinner, he dresses and heads over to the party, which is being held quite some distance from Arkaky's home. He soon finds himself in a well-lit and nice neighborhood, and enjoys the feeling of being out in the evening.

When Arkaky arrives at the party, he feels awkward. While his coworkers spend some more time praising his overcoat, he is soon left alone. Having never been to a party, he does not know what to do and soon wishes he were home sleeping. He leaves to walk home, and feels good enough to consider following a prostitute. He decides not to, and soon finds himself in a darker neighborhood. As he crosses a square he is accosted by a crowd of men, one of whom steals his overcoat. He is then kicked in the groin and passes out.

When he awakens, he realizes his overcoat is gone. He runs to a watchman's hut and asks why the watchman had not stopped the robbery. The watchman says that he had watched the whole thing, believing the men to be Arkaky's friends. He urges Arkaky to get help from the police inspector. Arkaky goes home and bangs on his landlady's door to let him in. She urges him to go to the borough Commissioner for help, because the police inspector was not trustworthy.

The next morning Arkaky tries to find the borough Commissioner, who is hard to locate. After a frustrating morning of trying to get in to see him, Arkaky uncharacteristically stands up for himself and insists on an audience. The Commissioner, however, is unsympathetic to Arkaky's plight, and asks Arkaky if he had been out with prostitutes. Arkaky becomes flustered and leaves.

Gogol tells the reader that Arkaky skips work, "for the first time in his life." When he returns to work the next day, his coworkers offer him their sympathy and try to raise some money for him. Their efforts are stymied, by a gift they have been forced to buy for a superior, we are told. Arkaky is advised to see an "important personage" to plead for some help. Arkaky decides to try to get an appointment with this person.

Gogol next describes what makes an "important personage" in Russian society. He notes that many people who receive an important position assume an air of superiority, which they reinforce with various tricks. Each important person is constantly comparing their status to others, and there is a hierarchy even among these elite.

Gogol then relates a story about a ninth class clerk who becomes insufferable after being given a position of authority. The clerk separates himself from his colleagues with office walls and then begins holding "audiences" with the people who work under him.

Eventually the man begins to feel isolated and alone, because his already low status (the man was elevated from the same level clerkship as Arkaky) means that he does not have many equals with whom to speak. We then learn that this clerk is the person with whom Arkaky is sent to speak.

Arkaky comes to speak with this person when he is entertaining an old friend. The important personage decides to torment Arkaky as a way of impressing his friend. He makes Arkaky wait for a long time, and then calls him into his office. Arkaky tries to flatter the man, who tells him he has not followed the proper procedures in reporting the stolen coat. Arkaky notes that he has come because secretaries and others in lower positions are unreliable, and the important personage accuses him of being a bad influence among the staff of the department.

Arkaky is so upset by the treatment that he swoons and has to be carried out. He walks home in the cold and goes straight to bed. Gogol tells the reader that the harsh words of the man have actually made Arkaky sick. Arkaky gets worse the next day, and a doctor tells the landlady that Arkaky will soon die. Arkaky, meanwhile, is in a feverish dream state and continually relives his audience with the important personage until he dies. His last words, the reader is told, are pleadings for his lost overcoat.

Following his death, Gogol tells the reader, life in Petersburg goes on as though Arkaky had never existed. Arkaky is viewed as an unimportant soul, whose only claim to glory was the glorious overcoat he enjoyed for a single day before he died. In fact, we are told that it took four days for anyone at Arkaky's office even to notice he had not come to work. Then a new clerk takes his place.

Gogol then tells the reader that Arkaky lives on as a ghost who pulled the cloaks off people looking for a stolen overcoat. One of his former coworkers sees this ghost and testifies that it is Arkaky. Because people are getting chills, the police are ordered to catch the ghost. One guard manages to get the ghost by the collar, but the ghost sneezes at the guard's snuff. The guards become scared, and the reader is left to wonder whether there is really a ghost or if the city has been gripped with fear over nothing.

Gogol ends the story by talking about the important personage, who regretted his harsh treatment of Arkaky. When he finds out Arkaky has died, the personage feels very guilty. He goes to a party and begins to drink champagne and chat happily with others. He then decides to visit a "lady friend," even though he has a wife and family, because he thinks it is proper for an important person like himself to have a mistress.

On the way to his mistress' house, the ghost of Arkaky stops the man. The ghost takes the important man's coat, and the man is so fearful that he rushes home and refuses to tell anyone what has happened. He then changes to be less superior and mean to his subordinates.

Gogol then says that after this incident, Arkaky's ghost was never seen again, although there were many rumors that he was still in the city. One rather weak watchman is said

to have seen the ghost, but this ghost was a large man with a mustache in a nice overcoat. The ghost threatens the watchman and then disappears.

Analysis

Gogol develops the character of Arkaky very carefully throughout the story, showing that he can be considered both humorous and tragic. The reader is told that Arkaky is unfortunately named, but is also shown that the other names he could have been given were much worse. By relating the strange circumstances of his naming, Gogol allows the reader to see that this sad little man seemed destined from the start to be pathetic. The name Shoenik is also an important symbol because it foreshadows the idea that Arkaky is walked on by almost every other character in the story.

When we see Arkaky as the target of his coworkers' dirty tricks we begin to feel for him, and we hope that he somehow manages to get somewhere in the world. His thin and tattered frock coat becomes a powerful symbol of the difficulties that working class people in Russia face, especially when we learn that a new coat will cost him 20 percent of his annual salary.

Gogol does not present Arkaky as someone to be pitied, however, because actually Arkaky is as happy as anyone else is in the world. He has a job that he both enjoys and which is a passionate hobby for him – so although the reader may be a bit confused by his choices they cannot deny that Arkaky is fulfilled. The reader may even laugh a little at the man who will become the main character of the story.

The simplicity of Arkaky's approach to life has an effect on at least one of his coworkers. The reaction of this coworker to Arkaky's pleas for mercy from the torment of the other clerks shows that even though he has rejected power, Arkaky can still make others stop and think. The affected clerk goes away with a new respect for the people around him, even if they appear to be strange or weak. In a very real way, this is what Gogol wants the reader to walk away from the story feeling.

The overcoat itself (and the idea of it, before it is made) is another important symbol in the story – in fact, this garment almost becomes another character in the story. Once it becomes to him that his old frock coat cannot be repaired, Arkaky becomes obsessed with the idea of getting a new overcoat. The coat's importance is emphasized by the sacrifices Arkaky must make to be able to afford it.

These sacrifices are also an important social commentary, one that Gogol was fortunate to be able to publish in an era of censorship and government control of the arts. Because he was considered one of the best authors and literary critics in Russia, Gogol was able to present a very powerful image of working life in Russia. Arkaky becomes a symbol for the whole working class, who must work for months to be able to afford something the elite take for granted everyday. This symbol is still relevant in today's era of consumerism and waste.

Once Arkaky gets his overcoat, he experiences (if only for a brief time) a new celebrity status. The tailor Petrovich, who had initially treated him poorly, dresses Arkaky as though he was a king, and Arkaky seems to become more alive with each step he takes as he wears it. It is almost as though by merging his character with the powerful symbol of the overcoat he has become more important and less of a figure of ridicule – even his coworkers start to warm up to him. This is once again important social commentary on Gogol's part as he draws a parallel between popularity and material things.

Arkaky's discomfort with his new celebrity status, however, shows that he is still the same down to earth person he once was. Although he enjoys dressing up and traveling to the nicer areas of the city while he is wearing his overcoat, once he takes it off at the party he immediately becomes uncomfortable. He feels the same way when his coworkers make a fuss on his arrival at work. Because he can see through his coworkers' fixation on material things, Arkaky is able to see that they are not happy for him – instead they are happy that they can be associated with someone who has fine clothes.

The loss of the overcoat is a crushing blow to Arkaky – not because he associates it with wealth or social status but because he has worked so hard to achieve his goal. His new overcoat had awakened his senses and caused him to undergo a kind of spiritual transformation. The thickness and warmth becomes at once a shield against the elements and a symbol of his hard work. Once the overcoat is gone he is forced to go back to his frock coat, and he quickly realizes that he quickly reacts against this change. Just as getting a new overcoat pushed Arkaky into new behavior losing it has the same effect, causing him to become forceful.

The problem with Arkaky's newfound "backbone" is that he has no idea where or how to direct his anger: while he is indignant and desperate to get his coat back, his personality has not changed enough to allow him to be effective. Couple this with the fact that none of the first few officials he speaks to have any desire or incentive to help him and you have the recipe for his ultimate frustration.

This is when the character of the "important personage" enters the story and picks up the threads of pettiness and suspicion that Gogol introduces in the first few lines of the story. This authority figure's meanness is described in detail, but Gogol does not offer a convincing reason why he is so mean – other than a petty desire to place himself above others. His poor treatment of Arkaky is also unprovoked, and it is something that he does without even thinking of the consequences. Arkaky, however, is destroyed by his rebuke, and he soon dies from the embarrassment and frustration that he feels.

While many have described "The Overcoat" as an example of good versus evil, it may be more appropriate to call it a battle between simplicity and the complex hierarchies of bureaucracy. The question of who wins is not as easy to answer as some might think. While Arkaky is defeated because no one can be bothered to care about his concerns, the "important personage" receives a life changing "tap on the shoulder" from Arkaky's ghost. In a fine example of irony, Gogol lets the reader know that the only person who lives "happily ever after" is the mustached man who stole Arkaky's new overcoat.

Characters

Akaky Akakyevich

See Akaky Akakievich Bashmachkin

Akaky Akakievich Bashmachkin

Akaky Akakievich Bashmachkin, the impoverished clerk and protagonist of the story, is one of the first appearances in modern literature of the "little man"—the poor, meek soul overwhelmed by dehumanizing forces in an increasingly technological and bureaucratized society. In introducing him, the story's narrator describes him as "a clerk of whom it cannot be said that he was very remarkable."

Akaky is a short, balding man with a bad complexion whose world seems to be defined by the tedious and solitary job of copying the various trivial documents he is given by his superiors. He has performed this work for uncounted years in an unspecified governmental department in St. Petersburg, even taking it home to complete at night. The prospect of a promotion that might give him the simplest editorial responsibility fills him with such fear that he once told a superior, "No, I'd rather copy something." A passive person, Akaky usually responds to the constant teasing of his coworkers by silently carrying on with his work and pretending that nothing is happening.

When he finds himself thrust into the center of attention after buying himself a new winter coat, the self-effacing clerk actually begins to feel a sense of pride. His newfound ability to assert himself is intensified after the coat is stolen: in trying to report the crime and seek restitution, as the narrator comments, "Akaky Akakievich for the first time in his life tried to show the strength of his character." In the end, however, this test of character overwhelms him, and his personality disintegrates. Akaky becomes incoherent and dies more or less as a result of a "severe reprimand" that he receives from the General. The final image we have of him is that of a walking corpse, for in death he finally obtains some of the justice that eluded him in life.

General

See Person of Consequence

Important Personality

See Person of Consequence

Narrator

Though not directly involved in the events of the story, the narrator is a very strong—and controversial—presence. The ambiguous picture of the narrator that emerges through his many digressions poses some of the most important interpretive dilemmas in the story: How closely should the narrator be identified with Gogol? What is the narrator's attitude toward the other characters in the story?

The narrator's point of view could be described as omniscient or authorial because it is privy to more information than any other character in the story and has access to the characters' innermost thoughts and feelings. On the other hand, there are moments when the narrator's awareness seems limited. He (or she) seems to rely on rumor, for example, in reporting the exploits of Akaky's corpse. The narrator's frequent use of awkward, pompous-sounding phrases like "as it were" and "so to speak"— that also characterize the language used by the bureaucrats in the story, including "The Person of Consequence" and Akaky himself—suggests that the story is being told by just another office drone like them. In some passages, such as the lengthy aside on the origin of Akaky Akakievich's name, the voice of the narrator sounds as mocking and sarcastic as those of Akaky's cruel office mates. In other passages, the narrator is more sympathetic, as in the description of Akaky's plea to be left alone by his co-workers.

Person of Consequence

"The Person of Consequence" is a petty official Akaky consults for help in retrieving his stolen overcoat. In introducing him, the narrator paints him as the epitome of all that is pretentious and inconsequential in the strictly hierarchical bureaucracy of Russia's government. Though his authority is only a few levels higher than Akaky's, this man is so intimidating to Akaky that his "severe reprimand"—a tirade about the importance of going through appropriate bureaucratic channels—leads to Akaky's fainting, falling ill, and eventually dying.

"The Person of Consequence" reappears in the final part of the story as he is confronted by and loses his own overcoat to Akaky's avenging corpse. On his way to visit a mistress at the time, the official rushes home to his wife and children vowing to practice better morals, and from then on, he treats his underlings with a little more kindness.

Themes

The Human Condition

The universal human need for compassion is a central theme in "The Overcoat." Akaky Akakievich and others in the story deny their connection to the rest of humanity, but ultimately fail. This view of the human condition is embodied in the early passage in which the narrator describes the lack of compassion with which Akaky is treated by his coworkers: in one of Akaky's rare pleas to be left alone by his tormentors, a newer office mate unexpectedly hears, "I am your brother." The overcoat becomes a symbol for both a basic human need that unites us as well as our tragic tendency to deny that need. The coat is stolen by men supposedly mistaken for Akaky's friends. His efforts to retrieve the coat are thwarted by the hierarchical bureaucracy that encourages people to deny their common bonds and to treat one another without compassion. The story's "fantastic" ending underscores the interconnectedness of all humanity as Akaky's corpse returns to seek vengeance by stealing overcoats from random passersby and from "The Person of Consequence" himself. Only after the tables have been turned by this supernatural visitation can "The Person of Consequence" recognize the error of his treatment of Akaky and others.

Alienation

The prevalent theme of alienation is closely tied to the story's rendering of the human condition. Akaky Akakievich has no close friends and is so alienated from those around him that he usually seems unwilling—or unable—to communicate at all. The anonymous, dehumanizing bureaucracy in which Akaky works epitomizes and perpetuates alienation. Difference in bureaucratic rank is an impediment to communication for both Akaky, who is intimidated by authority, and "The Person of Consequence," who feels obliged to insist on proper protocol. Akaky's total immersion in his copyist's job keeps him in isolation and further impairs his ability to communicate, as he becomes fixated on mere language fragments—the shapes of letters, and isolated words and phrases.

Language and Meaning

In addition to its pernicious, alienating effects on individuals, bureaucracy in "The Overcoat" also undermines language itself and its function as a medium for meaningful communication. The narrator's digressive way of telling the story, frequently using meaningless phrases like "as it were" and "so to speak," seems infected with the self-conscious and pompous culture of the bureaucratic office. Akaky's troubles with language begin before he can even speak, when he is christened with his absurd, repetitive and slightly off-color name. His mother, after rejecting equally absurd suggestions from the child's godparents (who are, not coincidentally, a head clerk in the

Senate and the wife of a police official), decides to name the child after her husband (also a government clerk): "His father is Akaky; let the son be Akaky, too." As he lay dying, Akaky is reduced to speaking "a medley of nonsense," which though obscene at times is also interspersed with the occasional "your Excellency," the appropriate polite form of address to a superior.

The Supernatural

The return of Akaky's corpse introduces a "fantastic" element into a story otherwise grounded in a realistic, contemporary setting and the mundane life of a clerk. Other aspects of the story could be described as exaggerated or absurd—Akaky Akakievich's name, and a bureaucratic reprimand so severe that it sends someone to his deathbed—but the story's ending is unique and, as the narrator comments, "unexpected." The supernatural intervention of Akaky's corpse appears in the story as the only means for redemption: by turning the tables on "The Person of Consequence," the corpse not only avenges Akaky but brings about his victim's acknowledgment of his own humanity as well. While not an explicitly religious image, Akaky's corpse seems to embody many of Gogol's spiritual concerns in an interesting—perhaps profane—twist on Christian mythology.

Style

Prose

Russian literature before the 1830s had been comprised almost entirely of poetry, while prose was reserved primarily for official documents, correspondence, histories, and journals. So Gogol's use of prose for literary purposes is in many ways one of his most lasting and significant contributions. Prose seems appropriate, of course, for telling the story of a simple clerk like Akaky Akakievich. The long and sometimes rambling sentences used by the narrator reflect Akaky's awkward personality, as well as the dull, bureaucratic milieu around him.

Narrative Perspective and Tone

The story is told from the perspective of an unnamed first person narrator who is not directly involved in the events of the story but is aware of (and, to varying degrees, sympathetic with) the characters' thoughts and emotions. For many present-day readers accustomed to short stories beginning in medias res (i.e., as the action has already begun), "The Overcoat" seems to adopt a leisurely pace initially as the character of Akaky Akakievich, his family background, and the St. Petersburg setting in which he lives and works are all introduced. Gogol uses the opening section of the story not only to set the scene, but to establish a particular narrative voice as well. By turns sarcastic, humorous, poignant, and disturbing, Gogol's narrator tells the story in a way that both entertains and instructs— with enough distance to provide critical commentary and yet enough dramatic intensity to draw readers in and not seem preachy.

Setting

The story's setting, amongst office-workers in contemporary St. Petersburg, must have seemed startling to Russian readers of Gogol's time, who were used to literature that described adventures amongst noblemen in pastoral and aristocratic settings. The setting in "The Overcoat" plays a role that is almost more important than that of any of the story's characters. The cold winter weather of St. Petersburg requires Akaky to buy his new coat, and the "cold" treatment he receives at the hands of the bureaucracy in which he exists finally kills him. The dehumanizing, anonymous and self-conscious atmosphere of the government offices that so dominate St. Petersburg in the story is conveyed in the very first sentence by the narrator's decision not to identify the name of the specific department. Akaky's home is described as cold, dark, and dreary, and his neighborhood, especially in contrast to that of the head clerk at whose home Akaky attends a party, is similarly bleak and dangerous.

Symbolism

For all the story's emphasis on stark realism in its depiction of St. Petersburg, "The Overcoat" operates on a symbolic level as well. Many elements—including the anonymous "everyman" nature of the character Akaky and the "fantastic" reappearance of his corpse near the end—give the story a fairy tale or dreamlike quality, suggesting that the whole narrative has a kind of symbolic significance. As the story's title indicates, Akaky's overcoat is an important, multilayered symbol. On one level, the coat represents a basic human need common to all residents of St. Petersburg in winter; at the same time, the overcoat in the story also seems to stand for the stifling status-oriented attitudes that envelope Russian society. Akaky is ridiculed for wearing his old threadbare overcoat, and though his new coat gives him entree into his coworkers' social circle, Akaky fails to make any real connection with them. When Akaky's corpse returns to strip an overcoat from "The Person of Consequence," what is taken away is the pretension that had kept "The Person of Consequence" from acknowledging his common bond with Akaky and the rest of humanity.

Historical Context

Nikolai Gogol lived during one of the most tumultuous periods of Russian history. It was a time when the strict censorship was imposed on writing and teaching; yet many writers were expressing new ideas that were openly critical of the status quo. Though there were some hostile reviews of Gogol's work, most were favorable and his writings were never actually repressed by censors during his lifetime. Nevertheless, the atmosphere of scrutiny under which writers lived and worked was never comfortable for the sensitive Gogol, and he felt the need to leave his country on two occasions. Though his friends urged him to return, Gogol stayed away for twelve years during the second of these selfimposed exiles.

Events in December of 1825, a few months before Gogol's seventeenth birthday, would be a harbinger of trouble to come. A group of idealistic young aristocrats with vaguely defined notions of democratic reform attempted to overthrow the czarist government. Czar Alexander I had just died from eating poisoned mushrooms in the Crimea and there was some delay before his younger brother Nicholas would be installed as the new leader of the country's vast empire. The revolutionaries ("Decembrists," as they were later called) were poorly organized and the new Czar was able to crush their revolt quickly. Nevertheless, Nicholas I—and the country as a whole—was badly shaken by the incident, and the new Czar would assert his authority with increasing rigidity throughout his thirty-year reign.

After the Decembrist revolt, Nicholas I completely revised the administrative structure of the Russian government. He removed aristocrats from government office and replaced them with professional military men. He established six new government departments, including a secret police that would all report to him and through which he would manage important economic and political matters. The government bureaucracy to which young Gogol applied for a job in 1828 was in turmoil: many of its officials were new in their jobs and there was a great deal of mistrust and fear due to the presence of the zealous new Czar's spies.

Abandoning work as a public servant for a literary career, however, did not remove Gogol from an atmosphere of contentiousness and instability. Despite Nicholas I's tightened control over the press and education, many Russian intellectuals continued to criticize the Czar and to debate amongst themselves, eventually splitting into two main camps. The "Slavophiles," who tended to support autocracy but favored free speech and an end to serfdom, held that the Orthodox Church and other aspects of Russian culture made it unique and superior. "Westernizers," on the other hand, believed Russia's progress to be dependent on liberal government and the adoption of ideas and technology from western Europe. Vissarion Belinsky, a prominent literary critic from the Westernizer's camp, was impressed by Gogol's early work and hailed the young author as a pioneer of a new, progressive aesthetic.

One could argue, however, that Gogol had as much in common with the more conservative Slavophiles as with Belinsky and the Westernizers. While Gogol was

interested in western Europe— and lived there for a time—he was very proud of his Ukranian/Russian roots. The work that first attracted Belinsky's attention to Gogol (*Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanki*), for example, was a collection of stories based on traditional Ukranian folktales that had a very Russian flavor. Gogol later became involved with the Russian Orthodox Church, and his growing conservatism eventually alienated Belinsky.

Ultimately, of course, Gogol cannot be assigned entirely to either camp. It is difficult to say whether it was the authoritarian censors of the Czar or the polarized community of Russian dissident intelligentsia that drove Gogol to leave Russia for so long. Gogol wrote "The Overcoat" during the longer of his two self-imposed exiles—in an effort, perhaps, to capture something quintessentially Russian from a perspective outside of Russia.

Critical Overview

When Nikolai Gogol's story "The Overcoat" appeared as part of his multivolume *Collected Works* in 1842, Gogol's prestige amongst the contentious Russian literary critics of the day was relatively secure. It was a time of rigid censorship and sometimes vindictive reviews, but Gogol had already won the support of powerful allies, including the famous (though recently deceased) poet Alexander Pushkin and prominent critic Vissarion Belinsky. More importantly perhaps, the Czar himself seemed to look favorably on Gogol's work. In fact, Gogol's harshest critic may have been Gogol himself. Halfway through a self-imposed twelve-year exile from Russia, he was beginning a period of intense selfdoubt and spiritual uncertainty that would last for the remaining ten years of his life.

"The Overcoat" and most of Gogol's other works have enjoyed both critical and popular success in Russia and elsewhere since their first appearance. Following Belinsky's interpretation, Gogol came to be seen as an originator of Russia's naturalist school of literature. As distinct from a rhetorical or romantic tradition epitomized by Gogol's friend and mentor Pushkin, Belinsky saw in Gogol's work a new approach emphasizing the realistic depiction of social problems as a means to foster progress. This naturalist approach would have tremendous influence on Russian novelists in the second half of the nineteenth century (e.g., Turgenev, Dostoevski, and Tolstoy), and then be elevated in the Soviet era to the status of state doctrine—"Socialist Realism."

Belinsky and other readers of "The Overcoat" in Gogol's day believed that the author displayed deep sympathy for the story's beleaguered main character and that he hoped to inspire reform on behalf of poor clerks and others. When Gogol appeared to espouse different ideas in his 1847 *Selected Passages*, Belinsky was especially shocked and disappointed: "Why, if you had made an attempt on my life," he wrote to Gogol, "even then I would not have hated you more than I do for these shameful lines." Belinsky theorized that Gogol's personality somehow contained two separate people: one was a brilliant artist who served the highest humanitarian and political ideas, and the other was a philosopher who, lacking basic intelligence and decency, deserved to be ignored.

Subsequent critics have sought alternatives to Belinsky's "Two Gogols" theory, but most have addressed questions pertaining to which political beliefs are expressed in Gogol's writing, what degree of sympathy he shows for his characters, and whether or not Gogol himself was rational and coherent.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, a group of Russian writers and intellectuals called the "Symbolists" suggested a new way of understanding Gogol's work. Pointing to the frequent appearance of the "half-fantastic" in Gogol's writing, the Symbolists believed that Gogol was not concerned with depicting external reality or political issues. Rather, they saw his stories as symbolic portraits of internal psychological struggles. Akaky's overcoat, for example, could represent a mask enabling the character to disguise his spiritual destitution. The views of these symbolist writers, however, were

not well received by Soviet Marxist literary critics, and soon the only interpretations published in Russia described Gogol as a politically engaged social realist.

On the international scene—particularly in Western Europe and America—Gogol's work has continued to receive a great deal of critical attention and diverse readings. More recent scholars have tended to see more ambivalence expressed in Gogol's work toward characters from the lower classes, like Akaky Akakievich, and to find in his stories suggestions of the conservative religious views he held late in his life. Gogol's work is seen as a major influence on the twentieth-century Austrian writer, Franz Kafka. Early in his career, the American/Russian-expatriate author Vladimir Nabokov devoted himself to writing a major study of Gogol. Gogol's high literary reputation is secure, with his writing seen today as an early inspiration for literary modernism and for the short story form itself.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
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Critical Essay #1

Sonkowsky has taught English at the University of Pennsylvania. In the following essay, he examines the "multiplicity of meanings" in Gogol's short story and asserts that it "[sheds] light . . . on modern life as it is experienced everywhere."

"The Overcoat" was the last short story Nikolai Gogol ever wrote, and many consider it to be his finest. Even setting aside his other literary accomplishments—writing a great stage comedy (*The Inspector General*) and the first great epic Russian novel (*Dead Souls*)—it is difficult to overestimate the importance of Gogol's work in introducing the short story as a literary form in Russia.

Beginning in 1831 with the publication of a collection of tales set in his native Ukraine (*Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka*) and culminating in 1842 with the appearance of "The Overcoat," Gogol developed a new form that is still in use today by writers in Russia and elsewhere. In more than a century and a half since "The Overcoat" first appeared, it has inspired diverse interpretations and raised many unanswered questions about its eccentric author. Gogol has been seen as both a progressive social critic and a conservative religious idealogue. He has been called the father of realism in Russian literature, but also a romantic and even, by Vladimir Nabokov, a "fantast." The ambiguities of Gogol's work are a reflection of the tumultuous times in which he lived and may, in fact, be an important source of the power in the new literary form he helped to establish.

One of the great coincidences in the history of literature is that the modern short story form first emerged in two different places on opposite sides of the world at virtually the same time. While Gogol was publishing the first Russian short stories, American writers Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe were establishing the same new literary form in their country. Hawthorne began writing sometime after graduating from college in 1825 and published his first collection of stories in 1837 (*Twice-Told Tales*). Poe published short stories in various journals throughout the 1830s and perhaps wrote his greatest story in 1839 ("The Fall of the House of Usher").

During these years, America and Russia were both considered somewhat remote, far from the centers of literary activity in the great capitals of western and central Europe. The early pioneers of the short story looked to these European cities for inspiration, encouragement and even protection— as would generations of Russian and American writers to come—but they also sought to convey experiences linked in identifiable ways to their own native countries. In addition to the language and setting these writers used, the short story form itself seemed to reflect some of the isolated and fragmented nature of life in the two rapidly changing countries of America and Russia. The short story has endured as a literary form and has thrived in many different cultures partly because it is uniquely suited to portraying aspects of modernity that would characterize much of the twentieth century.

The most immediate precursor of the modern short story may be the common folktale or fable. Amongst Romantic intellectuals from the generation preceding the first short story writers, folktales— along with a general interest in the innate wisdom of "common folk"—were in vogue. The Grimm brothers published their famous collections of folktales gathered from German peasants in 1812 and 1815. Gogol, Hawthorne, and Poe all incorporated narrative elements reminiscent of folktales, but their stories tended to be set in reality. The fantastic elements are portrayed as intrusions into a world familiar to most of the stories' contemporary readers—a world populated not by princesses and witches, but by office clerks and small-town ministers.

At the beginning of Gogol's "The Overcoat," the narrator takes great care initially in describing the setting in which the story takes place. Even if the main character (Akaky Akakievich) has a strange name and is a bit extreme in his obsessive work habits, St. Petersburg is easily recognizable in the story—as are its cold winters, large bureaucratic offices and dark streets that cross through neighborhoods of different social classes. The narrator feels obliged to pause and give warning to the readers before introducing the relatively bizarre concept of an animated corpse in search of vengeance: "But who could have imagined that this was not all there was to tell about Akaky Akakievich, that he was destined for a few days to make his presence felt in the world after his death, as though to make up for his life having been unnoticed by anyone? But so it happened, and our little story unexpectedly finishes with a fantastic ending."

The "fantastic ending" is a focal point for much of the ambiguity that has kept critical debate about the story alive for so long. The political reform-minded critics of Gogol's day saw the return of Akaky's corpse as a kind of progressive call to arms and as a way for Gogol to underscore the story's message of social criticism. Thus, they interpreted the ending in much the same way as one reads a moral at the end of a fable.

To some later critics, the story's ending seemed less "tacked on." They pointed to other elements in the story that can be seen as bizarre or unusual—the miraculous way in which the new overcoat seems to transform Akaky and win acceptance for him amongst his coworkers, for example. These critics argued that the entire story could be interpreted as a symbolic depiction of human emotions or psychological states. For them, the return of Akaky's corpse was the symbolic resurfacing of repressed guilt—an image to represent the feelings of remorse connected with treating someone like Akaky with insufficient compassion. Still other critics have seen Akaky's "resurrection" as a reworking of the Christian myth—an indication that Gogol meant to offer his story to readers as a means for their redemption.

"The Overcoat" is able to encompass a multiplicity of meanings in part because, unlike a fairy tale or fable with a moral lesson explicitly stated at the end, it is told by a first-person narrator who is as unable as any reader to give the final, authoritative statement of the story's significance. Gogol's contemporaries tended to assume that the first-person pronoun in the story simply referred to Gogol himself. Subsequent readers, however, have noticed ways in which Gogol distances himself from the narrator and creates the impression that the story is being told by another St. Petersburg office-

worker. For example, like other characters in the story, the narrator tends to use the somewhat formal language interspersed with meaningless little phrases like "as it were" and "so to speak." Toward the end of the story, as the narrator describes the indifference with which people in St. Petersburg responded to Akaky's death, he confesses that he too has been remiss: "Who came into [Akaky's] wealth God only knows; even I who tell the tale must admit that I have not bothered to inquire."

Does Gogol intend for us to feel sympathy for Akaky's plight and anger toward the system that makes it so difficult for poor clerks to afford basic necessities such as a new winter coat? Has the author created a symbolic portrait of the workings of the human mind racked by guilt and denial? Or is the story best understood as an expression of its author's concern over the spiritual well being of his countrymen and an attempt to point the way to redemption? Gogol's story leaves any or all of these possibilities open. In so doing, the story shows us something about human experience in a world characterized by radically competing ideas and large bureaucratic structures—something as true in Gogol's day as it still is today.

One commentary on the genre of the short story points out that although not every short story is set in a city, ". . . in a way the modern short story is an expression of the life led in the modern city, with its estrangement and anonymity and its special awareness." As one of the first short stories to give such prominence to a large urban setting, "The Overcoat" is obviously an early milestone in this important contemporary literary form. To study it is to begin to examine a tradition of writing that continues to grow and to shed light not just on Russian culture, but on modern life as it is experienced everywhere.

Source: Michael Sonkowsky, "Overview of 'The Overcoat,'" for *Short Stories for Student*, The Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt, Peace offers an interpretation of Gogol's "The Greatcoat" ("The Overcoat"), particularly in regard to Gogol's narrative technique, verbal devices, and use of humor.

"The Greatcoat" is the story of an impoverished civil service clerk, in St. Petersburg, who by dint of great sacrifices manages to buy himself a new coat, but is robbed of it the very first evening he wears it. He tries to get it back by going to see a highlyplaced official who gives him such a reprimand that the poor clerk falls ill and dies. Later his ghost haunts St Petersburg, stealing coats; it is only laid to rest when it has taken the greatcoat of the highlyplaced official himself.

The story is often regarded as having initiated a whole tradition of Russian realism. 'We have all come out of Gogol's greatcoat' is a remark allegedly uttered by Dostoevsky (though this attribution is suspect). Yet in what sense can a story with a ghost sequence be called realistic? By realism Russian critics in the nineteenth century often meant 'critical realism,' implying that a writer by portraying society 'realistically' was thereby expressing criticism of it. On the face of it the plot of "The Greatcoat", as outlined, does suggest a social theme and it cannot be denied that criticism is implicit in Gogol's treatment of the police (in particular his laughter at the inept constables). Veneration of rank and the insolence of authority (the 'Important Person') are presented with implied censure. Yet, as regards his poverty, the authorities in Akakii Akakievich's own department are not responsible for his plight. The director gives him a much higher bonus than he had expected when he needs the money for his coat. Afterwards the assistant chief clerk invites him to a party, partly in honour of his coat. Nor can it be argued that the civil service has turned Akakii Akakievich into the automation that he undoubtedly is. Indeed, he seems to have been born to his role and we learn that he had once been given more interesting work but had proved incapable of it.

Nor is it entirely true that he is portrayed sympathetically. If the other clerks poke fun at him, they do little more than the narrator of the story himself; for in spite of his strictures on those writers who mock titular councillors, he nevertheless constantly presents his own hero as a figure of fun, with a neck that reminds him of a toy plaster-kitten, and the strange ability always to find himself under a window when rubbish is being thrown out....

The opening paragraph of "The Greatcoat" should be a warning to the reader. It is long, involved and absolutely irrelevant to the story itself. In fact the opening paragraph is a sort of verbal arabesque which goes nowhere, except back to its original starting point: from 'In one of our government departments' to '. . . a certain department.'

It is typical of Gogol to take his reader on a long aside which will go nowhere. As a form of humour it may be compared to the shaggy dog story, where the joke is not for the listener but on the listener. It is, of course, a dangerous game to play with a reader, who can always terminate the joke by putting the book down. Moreover, such a joke implies

a latent hostility towards the reader. Yet if the anecdote in the opening paragraph about the police inspector has any point at all, it is to suggest quite the reverse, namely that readers (especially those in official positions) are only too prone to show hostility towards authors.

The narrator of the story is, of course, not Gogol himself. It is someone who is very naive, not at all well educated, and who as a teller of a story is incredibly inept. He repeatedly concentrates on inessential and often absurd details, at the expense of the plot itself—and in this sense the opening paragraph is a foretaste of what is to come. (The inept narrator is a favourite device with Gogol, and this type of tale—a story told by an illiterate narrator—is quite common in Russian literature).

But although the narrator is naive, the narrative, in effect, is not: it is full of hints, innuendoes, puns and verbal tricks of all sorts. It is through these that the tale really unfolds, and in a way which gives hidden depth to a seemingly shallow surface.

One of the great ironies of this style is that the naive narrator requires a sophisticated reader, a reader who is sensitive, not to the possibilities of personal libel, as those whom Gogol mocks in the opening paragraph, but one who is sensitive to words and tone and word-play.

Naive ambiguity is a constant feature of the narrative technique in "The Greatcoat". There are many puns which communicate a waywardness and playfulness of tone to the narrative, yet their contribution is not so much to the humour of the story as to the external presentation of the inner world of the central character, a man who is himself obsessed by the outward form of words, their graphic contours, only because their real content and function eludes him. The pun is precisely this: a word taken at face value which nevertheless has a hidden content beneath its deceptive surface. The verbal play has more meaning than is at first apparent, and the relationship between facade and interior is not only the central 'device' of "The Greatcoat", it is the architectural principle which informs its shape.

There is a great deal of verbal play at the opening of the story, (i.e., the whole of the introductory section ending with the play on the word 'councillor'). In introducing Akakii Akakievich the narrator places exaggerated importance on the naming of his hero, whereas his formative years are merely bridged by a verbal formula: 'The child was christened. At which he began to cry and he pulled such a face as though he sensed beforehand that he would be a titular councillor.' Almost immediately after this we find him already long established in the office as a copy clerk: '. . . so that later people became convinced that he had obviously been born into the world ready-made, in a uniform and a bald path on his head.' His christening seems to preordain his profession and his profession seems to have been entered on at birth.

This emphasis on his christening and lack of interest in his formative years suggests that his name is far more important than his life in determining his character. In particular the origin of the surname is treated with naive seriousness:

The civil servant's name was Bashmachkin. From the very name itself one can see that at some time it had been derived from a shoe; but when, at what particular time and in what way it was derived from a shoe—nothing of this is known. Both his father and his grandfather, and even his brother-in-law, all Bashmachkins through and through, used to walk about in boots, changing the soles only three times a year.

The whole of this explanation is patently absurd, if taken at its surface meaning. Yet, on another level, it suggests a whole train of semantic ambiguities which are picked up and developed later in the story, and in such a way as to reveal the psychological problems of Akakii Akakievich himself.

In the first place the verb 'derived' is taken quite literally, (the all important qualification 'word' which ought to precede 'shoe' is omitted) so that our hero's name appears to have come directly from an article of footwear—a shoe (just as later it will be suggested that he has almost got married to a greatcoat). Through his surname the hero is thus directly identified with a mere casing of the human body.

The narrator compounds the absurdity by asserting that all Akakii Akakievich's family wore boots, and gives the irrelevant information that they had the soles replaced only three times a year. (The saving of his soles will later figure prominently in Akakii Akakievich's economies needed to acquire the coat.) The list of Akakii Akakievich's relatives, who, according to the narrator, are all genuine Bashmachkins includes 'even a brother-in-law' (*i dazhe shurin*) despite the fact that, as this is a relationship by marriage, he could not possibly be a genuine Bashmachkin as the narrator claims. Yet the inclusion of this brother-in-law is absurd in an even more profound sense. Russian relationships by marriage are very precise, and *shurin* can only mean 'wife's brother.' For Akakii Akakievich to have a '*shurin*,' he must also have a wife, but a wife is no more in evidence than these other relatives with whom he is here credited. Akakii Akakievich is completely alone. This little verbal puzzle, therefore, tangles the 'shoe from which his name is derived, with the relatives from whom he is actually derived (his father and his grandfather) and ties them in with a figure to whom he can only be related by a sexual bond (the brother-in-law).

The theme of the wife, who is non-existent but implied, appears again when the narrator gives examples of his 'down-trodden' existence, such as the teasing to which he is subjected at the office:

They would relate, right in front of him, various stories concocted about him. They said about his landlady, an old woman of seventy, that she beat him, and they would ask him when their wedding would be. They would scatter paper on his head, calling it snow.

The motif of the 'shoe' is prominent in the picture which stirs a vague sexual awakening in Akakii Akakievich, and the detail seems intentional, for virtually the same picture is described at the end of "The Nose", but without the mention of a shoe. At a later stage a shoe will also link this picture with his landlady. Thus the 'shoe,' from which his outward identification (his name) is derived, suggests a latent sexual motif in much the same way as does that other item of apparel, his other outward form, the greatcoat.

Akakii Akakievich's progress through St. Petersburg may be interpreted as a journey in self-exploration: it is certainly a progress towards light. He moves away from his own badly-lit part of the city, past the lighted window with its erotic picture to the apartment of the civil servant who has invited him; 'the assistant chief clerk lived in great style; there was a lantern shining on the staircase.'

The fact that Akakii Akakievich is at first overawed is again suggested by Gogol's external method of psychological portrayal. Akakii Akakievich is reduced to the status of an object among other objects:

On entering the hall Akakii Akakievich saw on the floor a whole row of galoshes. Among them in the middle of the room stood a samovar, noisily emitting clouds of steam. On the walls hung nothing but greatcoats and capes, among which there were several which even had beaver collars or velvet lapels.

It seems significant that he is confronted with footwear and greatcoats. The only thing which appears to have life in this ante-room is another inanimate object—the samovar. Real life once more, it seems, is going on elsewhere: for on the other side of the wall he can hear the noise of the party. The guests have already been assembled for some time.

Nevertheless the occasion has been held partly to honour Akakii Akakievich's new coat. He is accepted by this society, and his greatcoat is rapturously admired, even though there are better ones hanging up in the hall. 'Then, of course, everybody dropped him and his coat and turned, as is the custom, to the whist-tables.' After all, Akakii Akakievich is not really at home in these surroundings. He tries to creep away, but is made to stay for supper and two festive glasses of champagne. It is after midnight when he escapes. He finds his coat, 'which, not without regret, he perceived was lying on the floor.' He carefully shakes it, and goes down to a still lighted street. Here, sexual promptings (inexplicable to the narrator) once more well up within him:

Akakii Akakievich went along in a gay mood, and for some unknown reason he was even almost on the point of running up behind some lady or other, who went past like lightning, and every part of whose body was full of unusual movement. However, he stopped at once and went on as before very slowly, amazed himself at this unaccountable burst of speed.

His progress now, however, is away from light and conviviality towards the dark, shuttered emptiness of his own quarter of the town.

On his outward journey he had been *looking* for the first time in his life. Now, as he crosses a dark square, where a light seems 'at the world's end' and 'it is as though there is a sea around him,' our explorer closes his eyes—and is robbed of his greatcoat by men with moustaches. Thus he is brutally deprived of the promise of that fuller life which had been offered to him so briefly and so tenuously.

He goes home to his landlady and the details of his return seem to reproduce in ironical terms the elements of the picture in the lighted window which had earlier aroused such strange stirrings within him:

The old lady, the landlady of his apartment, hearing the terrible knocking at the door, hurriedly jumped out of bed and with a shoe on only one foot, ran to open the door, holding her nightshirt to her bosom out of modesty.

The landlady, as we know, has already been associated with the marital status of Akakii Akakievich by the clerks at the office, who teased him about marrying her and scattered 'snow' on his head. Now, when he comes back covered in real snow, his landlady, like the woman in the picture, confronts him with 'a shoe on one foot' and a hint of sexual titillation ('holding her nightshirt to her bosom, out of modesty'). But the 'man at the door' is not the dandy with the side whiskers and beautiful beard; it is the dishevelled Akakii Akakievich, with what little hair he has in complete disarray.

So Akakii Akakievich is thrown back on his seventy-year-old landlady, by the 'light' of whose candle he used to work in the evenings (after first having taken off his underwear to economise on laundry!). On her advice he goes to the police, but the district superintendent seems to think that the loss of the coat is in some way connected with its owner's dissolute life:

The district superintendent received the story of the theft of the coat somehow in an exceedingly strange way. Instead of turning his attention to the main point of the matter, he began to question Akakii Akakievich as to why he was returning home so late, and hadn't he called in at some disorderly house or other?

Here, as elsewhere in the story, the significance of the coat is interpreted not in terms of the obvious, but in terms of a suggested sexual theme. The hint is present even on his death-bed, for he keeps asking his landlady to drag a coat-thief out from under his blankets.

If in the opening section of "The Greatcoat" verbal play is an important device for establishing motifs which are to be developed in the central section of the story, now in the final section (the ghost sequence) verbal play has a similar function. There is a recurring pun on the concepts of 'dead' and 'alive.' The police are ordered to apprehend the '*dead man* dead or alive.' One of them apparently succeeds, but loses the ghost because he pauses to take snuff of a quality 'which even a dead man couldn't stand,' and from that time on the police 'got so frightened of dead men, that they were even fearful of arresting the living.' Finally, there is an 'apparition' at the end of the story, who when challenged by a policeman, shows him a huge fist 'such as you would not find on the living.'

All this seems like humour directed at the police, who throughout the story have shown themselves to be particularly inept, but there is also a serious intention behind the word-play. The ghost is first introduced as 'a dead man in the form of a civil servant' (*mertvets v vide chinovnika)*. Later he is simply referred to as the 'dead man-civil servant'

(*chinovnik-mertvets*). The verbal play on 'dead' and 'alive' is therefore a motif pointing to the artistic function of the story's fantastic ending; it raises the whole question of '*chinovnik-mertvets*.'

When he was alive, Akakii Akakievich was in reality more like a 'civil servant in the form of a dead man.' The promise of an awakening into life, flimsy though it may have been, was cruelly taken from him by men with moustaches. When he has died he returns as a 'dead man in the form of a civil servant' to avenge himself and, by one of those ironies in which the story abounds, he proves to be more effective as a dead man, than he was when alive.

It is typical of Gogol that this inversion to which the central character is subjected should also be reflected in the external world around him. When earlier Akakii Akakievich was going through the streets of St. Petersburg, the narrator was insistent that everything in the city was so muddled in his head that he could not remember names; now, when his hero appears as a ghost, he is very meticulous about giving the precise location of each appearance. In the first instance a real man was going through a spiritual city; in the second a spirit man is haunting a concrete and actual city.

It is only after the ghost has robbed the 'important person' of his greatcoat that this unquiet spirit is finally laid, and the whole incident is presented with the same ironic parallelism of detail which has been noted elsewhere in the story. The important person, having just learned of the death of Akakii Akakievich, goes to a party to cheer himself up. (Akakii Akakievich had been to a party before he lost his coat.) Here (like Akakii Akakievich before him) he has two glasses of champagne. He feels in a gayer mood, and just as Akakii Akakievich had then, for some unknown reason, wanted to chase after a woman in the street, so the important person now entertains thoughts of an amorous nature:

The champagne put him in a mood for special measures; that is he decided not to go home yet, but to call on a certain lady of his acquaintance, Karolina Ivanovna, a lady who appeared to be of German extraction, and for whom he felt an entirely friendly relationship.

Here, as in the earlier incident with Akakii Akakievich, the narrator shows himself to be naively uncomprehending about the sexual motivation of his characters.

Whereas Akakii Akakievich had been making the first tentative gestures in the direction of life, the important person has long had it firmly in his grasp. He takes an active part in the evening gathering as a man among equals; on leaving the party he is going to a real mistress; and moreover, unlike Akakii Akakievich, he also has a family:

But the important person, although he was quite content with the family affection he received at home, considered it fitting to have a lady-friend in another part of town for friendly relationships. This ladyfriend was not a whit better or younger than his wife. But such puzzles do exist in the world, and it is not for us to judge them.

It seems poetic justice that the ghost should rob this 'man of substance' of his greatcoat at this precise moment. The effect is cathartic: the ghost is laid, and the general himself becomes a much better person.

The story ends with yet another ironic twist. Another ghost is seen and it is believed to be the ghost of Akakii Akakievich, but it is really an 'apparition' and when challenged by a particularly inept policeman it threatens him with a fist not unlike that of the man who had stolen Akakii Akakievich's greatcoat in the first place and had showed him a fist 'the size of a civil servant's head.' The policeman leaves the apparition alone:

The apparition was, however, much taller and wore really enormous moustaches, and turning its steps, as it seemed, towards the Obukhov Bridge, it completely disappeared in the darkness of the night.

Even Akakii Akakievich's credibility as a ghost, it seems, is being challenged by those men with moustaches and the whole story ends on a note of darkness.

Source: R. A. Peace, "Gogol: 'The Greatcoat,'" in *The Voice of a Giant: Essays on Seven Russian Prose Classics*, edited by Roger Cockerell and David Richards, University of Exeter, 1985, pp. 27-40.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Proffer examines the major critical viewpoints regarding Gogol's short story and suggests that "the real meaning of the story is then that life, even when it shrinks to almost ridiculous proportions, in the end triumphs over death."

Some critics have seen in Akaky Akakievich a humiliated and insulted human being who invokes our pity by his cruel lot and who makes us understand that, despite his insignificance, he is also "our brother." In order to prove their point, these critics cite what is usually called the "humane passage," in which Gogol presents the timid protest of his outraged hero and ponders the profound impression that these words make on a young colleague

Leave me alone, gentlemen. Why do you insult me?— There was a strange note in the words and in the voice in which they were uttered: there was something in it that touched one's heart with pity. Indeed, one young man who had only recently been appointed to the department and who, following the example of the others, tried to have some fun at his expense, stopped abruptly at Akaky's mild expostulation, as though stabbed through the heart; and since then everything seemed to have changed in him and he saw everything in quite a different light. A kind of unseen power made him keep away from his colleagues whom at first he had taken for decent, well-bred men. And for a long time afterwards, in his happiest moments, he would see the shortish Civil Servant with the bald patch on his head, uttering those pathetic words, "Leave me alone! Why do you insult me?" And in those pathetic words he seemed to hear others: "I am your brother."

It should be noted that the critics who stress the pitiful fate of this little man and the fact that this humiliated being is "our brother" are at the same time inclined to see only the "humane passage" and to forget the remainder of the story. M. and R. Hoffmann bluntly deplore the fact that Gogol was not satisfied with the theft of the overcoat as suffi- cient cause for Akaky Akakievich's death, but that he also found it necessary to introduce the episode with the "important person." The fantastic ending of the story, according to them, is all the more out of place in that it destroys the impression of the whole "and transforms this *realistic* and *tragic* story into a fantastic tale of a very questionable nature." [Modeste and Rostislav Hofman, *Gogol: Sa vie et son ouevre*, 1946] In fact, they readily admit that the story as such does not interest them: "The major interest in 'The Overcoat' lies not in its subject, nor in its development, but in a new theme which slips in rather timidly, a theme which inspired the novelists of the second half of the nineteenth century to compose their vast symphonies. When the colleagues of Akaky Akakievich made fun of him, his voice echoes weakly, imploring pity for all of the unhappy, humiliated, oppressed and dispossessed creatures of this world . . ."

There exists, then, a critical viewpoint which places the highest value on the "humane passage" and stresses the humiliating destiny of the little civil servant, who implores our pity and our recognition of his worth as a human being. In addition, there is also a viewpoint which sees Akaky Akakievich as a ridiculous character of inferior human

status, and which says that throughout the story Gogol stressed only the ridiculous insignificance of his hero. This criticism sees the "humane passage" only as an episode grafted onto the story, an abstraction by which the author vainly strove to add a moving and ethical touch to a commonplace and cruel story. Nearly all of the discussions of "The Overcoat" which we have read fall between these two points of view.

We know of only one study which attempts to resolve the paradox of the humiliated and pitiful man who is still our brother, and the ridiculed and inferior "dead soul," to use Vyacheslav Ivanov's expression. This is Driessen's study which emphasizes both the pitiful banality of this character and his tragic fight for happiness and the defense of an ideal. [F.C. Driessen, *Gogol als novellist*, 1955] At the same time, Driessen notes that there are two "humane passages" and he tries to integrate them as well as the story's fantastic ending into the narrative. According to Driessen, the two passages accent the tragic in Akaky Akakievich's life and raise the comic to the level of humor. The fantastic ending is tied, by its form, to the preceding part of the story; it contains the same themes (the theft of the overcoat, the evening party, the romantic adventure). In addition to his emphasis on the relationship between the two perspectives, Driessen refers to a first draft which shows that Gogol originally wanted to entitle his tale "The Story of a Civil Servant who Stole Overcoats." It can, therefore, be assumed that initially the little civil servant's theft of overcoats was the main theme of the story. If this is so then the fantastic ending must be of major significance. It shows how Akaky Akakievich, by stealing overcoats after his death, avenges himself on the bureaucratic world which had trampled underfoot his human dignity. That world was dead. Akaky Akakievich alone guarded the flame of life no matter how small. The real meaning of the story is then that life, even when it shrinks to almost ridiculous proportions, in the end triumphs over death....

In short, as a factual narrative the story has ended, just as Gogol himself stresses: Akaky Akakievich had died and was buried and a new employee sat in his place. If the epilogue is nonetheless integrated into the story, it is because it still plays a role in evoking Bashmachkin's character; it brings to light the urgency and desperation of his appeals for help, his forays against the world of policy and bureaucracy in the tragic moments of his existence, when he fought to regain his lost happiness.

But who could have foreseen that this was not all about Akaky Akakievich, that he was destined to make quite a stir for some days after his death, as if in recompense for a life that had passed completely unnoticed.

Thus Gogol begins the final part of his narrative. Indeed, all these people from whom Akaky sought recourse in his distress and who then made fun of him—in the end, they all seem affected by the violence of his appeal and protest, especially the "important person." Not without good reason does Gogol say that the fantastic epilogue was written from the perspective of this character. In his anguished imagination, as in that of others who had seen Akaky in his misery, the little civil servant takes on a grandiose shape; he becomes an enormous and menacing figure. The ghost of the late Bashmachkin appears as a grotesque contrast to the timid civil servant of real life. Yet by this exaggeration Gogol shows us, in effect, how in spite of everything, Bashmachkin left an

indelible mark by his fight against the misfortune which crushed him, just as it crushes the conquerors of this world.

If we weigh the different elements, it appears that Akaky Akakievich is characterized by a combination of comic, grotesque, tragicomic and tragic elements. The comic elements at the beginning of the story make us see in Akaky a man whose physical and psychic vitality finds itself in some ways annihilated by all kind of circumstances which automatize him completely. A stubborn and bizarre Bashmachkin who is totally unassimilated into society emerges before us. From the first "humane passage" Gogol deepens the comic aspects in Akaky's personality. He shows us that the mechanical side of Akaky's life may be the result of a state of mind completely distracted and absorbed by an ideal, the effect of an extraordinary zeal which makes Akaky devote himself completely to a task which he judges to be sacred, to such an extent that he forgets everything else. Gogol makes it clear that the mechanical side of his activities is partly the result of his childlike spirit. (Cf. the fact that he often talks like a child, repeating the same meaningless particles, while expressing something very precise.) The grotesque elements characterize Akaky Akakievich as a man who constantly lives anxiously and austerely for a ridiculous goal. The tragicomic elements emphasize the poverty and drabness of his fate. The tragic elements finally present the man who little by little realizes the futility of his asking help from the officials. He rebels against this bureaucracy which refuses to listen to his appeal and which then, indifferent to his happiness, crushes him with its formality and vanity.

There has been some question concerning the relation of the two "humane passages" to the rest of the story. By mixing the serious and ludicrous, these two passages point to the pitiful humility and the human dignity of Akaky Akakievich. The first passage anticipates the story's development; the second makes the meaning of the events stand out and at the same time accentuates Bashmachkin's defeat which puts him in the class of the tsars of this world and constitutes a transition to the fantastic epilog. This grotesque counterpart of the story also contributes to the presentation of Bashmachkin's character; it clarifies retrospectively or rather, shows through some of the other characters' feverish imagination, Akaky Akakievich's moving and sad rebellion against the world of bureaucracy.

Source: Carl R. Proffer, "Practical Criticism for Students," in *From Karamzin to Bunin: An Anthology of Russian Short Stories*, edited by Elizabeth Trahan, Indiana University Press, 1969, pp. 12-17.

Critical Essay #4

In the following excerpt Proffer examines the Symbolist, Formalist and Freudian interpretations of Gogol's short story. He also discusses Gogol's style, deeming him a "verbal gymnast."

[Gogol] is rightly regarded as Russia's foremost verbal gymnast. Tongue-twisting names, rhymes, and puns spring up like clowns. Using metaphor and metonymy to turn people into toe-nails or noses, he works more transformations than a drunken Roman mythologist. His prose is poetic and onomatopoetic— rhetorical figures abound, rhythmic and phonetic considerations help determine each phrase. Pushkin's favorite punctuation is the period. Gogol's is the semicolon; and at first glance, the profusion of dependent clauses and qualifications may bring to mind a fishing reel's backlash. Many of Gogol's old-fashioned contemporaries considered him a vulgarian, both because of his inelegant subject matter and the "non-literary" vocabulary which he introduced (colloquialisms, bureaucratese, dialectisms, jargon, and neologisms); but with time his lexical salmagundi, syntactical intricacies, and sometimes shaky grammar became "estheticized," and his style was imitated by writers as different as Dostoevsky, Saltykov-Shchedrin, Remizov, Bely, and Abram Tertz.

"The Overcoat" (1842) was Gogol's last story. Partly because it was published in a four-volume collection of his works—and in the same year as *Dead Souls*—his contemporaries paid little attention to it. I say this because one of the folklore items among teachers of Russian literature is the belief that Belinsky's interpretation of the story has been followed by all socially-oriented critics, but in fact Belinsky wrote no critique or analysis of "The Overcoat." He did not "interpret" Gogol's best story. Most Russians take it as a philanthropic tale. Indeed, the entire philanthropic trend of Russian literature, with "little men" as heroes, has been traced back to Pushkin's "The Station Master" and Gogol's Petersburg stories. Dostoevsky's remark, which he did not make (and which is not true), that "We all came from under Gogol's 'Overcoat'" is reprinted in almost every literary history written in the last seventy years. The first axiom of this theory, variations on which are used by every Soviet critic, is that Gogol was a realist.

Following the lead of V. V. Rozanov, the Russian Symbolists preferred to emphasize the nonrealistic aspects of Gogol's work, his hyperbole and fantasy. They suggest it is impossible to sympathize with such grotesque humanoids as Akaky. The second assault on the philanthropic interpretation came from the Formalists. Boris Eichenbaum interpreted the story simply as an excuse for unfolding the verbal material. According to him, Gogol's switching from the comic to the pathetic to the ironic is all a game—acoustical play on the part of a narrator who mugs and mimes, changing his voice unexpectedly to entertain the listener. Akaky Akakievich's remark, "Leave me alone, why do you insult me" and the passage about the clerk who was so touched by these words are not meant to arouse pity—they are there simply to shatter the comic play and create a grotesque contrast in intonation. The sterility of this part of Eichenbaum's analysis results from the theoretical straight-jacket which the Formalists sometimes mistook for armor in their revolt against the sociological critics. In reaction to Soviet criticism, most

Western scholars have expanded on the Symbolist or Formalist views of "The Overcoat." For example, [Chizhevskij] claims that the story does not attack social evils or defend underdogs; its theme is the development of a passion for a nothing (an idea first suggested by Apollon Grigoriev). Since Akaky sees the coat as a wife, Chizhevskij interprets it as a parody of romantic love stories. Critics of Formalist inclination like to see parodies in everything because it emphasizes the *literariness* of a work as opposed to its bases in real life. While Chizhevskij's article contains several ridiculous assertions (e.g. that Petrovich is the devil), he does offer some sophisticated stylistic analysis. For example, the adverb *dazh*e (even) is used dozens of times, often illogically. It intensifies where there is no need of intensification. Chizhevskij hypothesizes that the use of "even" projects Akaky's "view from below" through the narrator. Akaky is such a limited, insignificant creature that he sees ordinary things as strange, grand, and beyond his sphere.

One man's heresy is another man's cliche, as is seen by the different attitudes (in communist countries and in western ones) toward the assertion that Gogol is not a realist. It seems clear to us that Tolstoy and Flaubert are poles away from Gogol, that his "realism" is the literary analogue of Potemkin's villages. His sometimes microscopic description is designed to trick the reader; when you step back a little you see that things are much vaguer than they seemed. The student should note some of the features of style which help create this impression. For example, the narrator staggers from omniscience to senility in the same paragraph—although usually the things which he cannot remember (the date the coat is finished) are not important anyway. Digressiveness is not a characteristic of realistic style, and the Sternian divagations of the narrative begin after only two words. Compare the final version of the opening to this early (1839) draft

In the department of taxes and collections [*podatej i sborov*] which, incidentally, is sometimes called the department of frauds and nonsense [*podlostej i vzdorov*], not because there were in fact frauds there, but because Mssrs. the civil servants like to joke just as much as military officers do—thus, in the department....

The fungi-like growth of "irrelevant" details is characteristic of Gogol's work on the successive versions. Often the reader is so hypnotized by the details that he forgets to question absurdities "such as the bland assumption that 'full-grown young pigs' commonly occur in private houses," says Vladimir Nabokov, referring to the last paragraph of the story.

Following hints by Bely, James Woodward has carefully catalogued a number of specific devices which Gogol uses to blur reality, to make things indefinite: affirmative statements which are immediately made dubious by qualifications, a plethora of adversative conjunctions (but, however, nevertheless, etc.) used to introduce comments which cast doubt on the veracity of statements in previous clauses, negative statement ("not without pity," "not without terror"), direct and indirect questions, a profusion of indefinite pronominal adjectives (*kakoj-to, kakoj-nibud', kak-o,* etc. which are often untranslatable), the frequent use of *kazat'sja* (to seem), *kak budto, kak budto-by, pochti* (as if, almost). These combine to create the vagueness which is typical of Gogol's

unreal world of phantoms and fantasy. To this catalogue one might add Gogol's constant use of euphemism and humorous periphrasis. For example, the important person does not have a mistress, he has a "lady for friendly relations."

But there is fact in fantasy, and we can feel sympathy even for caricatures. Even an unrealistic story full of comedy can be philanthropic. While Gogol shows us the ways in which Akaky Akakievich is ridiculous, he never scorns him; while he shows his ignorance, he puts him in positions so universal that the reader can feel pity. The plot itself is archetypically tragic: the painful quest for the desired object, acquisition, and then unjust loss and defeat. Defeat follows on the heels (or shoulders) of victory—for kings or Akakys. The plainly philanthropic comments (such as "I am your brother"), the episode with the young clerk, and perhaps most important, the character change in the significant personage—to whom, incidentally, several significant pages of the story are devoted—cannot be explained away simply as "contrast." Gogol wrote "The Overcoat" as he was finishing the first part of *Dead Souls*, and there are several parallels between the two works. For example, Akaky dies:

Gone and disappeared was a being who was protected by no one, interesting to no one, who had not even attracted the attention of a naturalist who does not fail to impale an ordinary fly [earlier Akaky is compared to a fly] on a pin and examine it in his microscope.

In *Dead Souls* Gogol uses the same metaphor when declaring that his artistic principles include the portrayal of just such characters:

For the judgment of the writer's own times does not recognize that equally marvelous are the lenses that are used for contemplating suns and those for revealing to us the motions of insects imperceptible to the naked eye; for the judgment of his times does not recognize that a great deal of spiritual depth is required to throw light upon a picture taken from a despised stratum of life, and to exalt it into a pearl of creative art.

Akaky Akakievich is one of Gogol's dead souls, perhaps the most dehumanized of all; but it is clear from his works and correspondence that he felt deep sadness for his creatures. The lessons he hoped to teach by making the world look through his microscope were not those of art for art's sake.

We can also learn a lesson from the Freudian view of "The Overcoat." There is an abundance of coprological [related to excrement] detail in the story: Akaky Akakievich's name itself suggests the child's word for excrement, the other names he was almost given suggest sucking and urination, his complexion is hemorrhoidal, and in one variant he even has a coat the color of a cow pie. Akaky's retarded sexual development is indicated by this imagery connected to other overt sexual imagery— the coat itself as a wife with a good thick lining, the woman that he inexplicably trots after, the picture of the Frenchwoman with her leg bared, the jokes about his landlady, the policeman's suggestion that he has been to a bordello, and the significant personage's inexplicable visits to Karolina Ivanovna. Freudian commentators have a tendency to fantasize about the implications of these remarks for *Gogol's* psychology. This, I think, is dangerous and

mostly irrelevant; but their theory does focus our attention on facts (i.e., details) of the story which otherwise might be overlooked. One level of the story's humor remains closed to the reader if he does not notice the persistence of these scatological and sexual allusions.

Finally, I would warn that it is possible to exaggerate the importance of digressions in "The Overcoat." The fact that digressions occur at the very beginning and at the very end tends to make us remember the story as more digressive than it really is. Actually, in the main body of the story, Gogol is quite business-like. For example, the central block of material is a single gigantic paragraph (unique in Gogol's fiction) almost nine pages long. This digressionless unit covers the entire period from Akaky Akakievich's decision to get a new coat until the moment when he steps onto the square where it will be stolen. Twelve pages precede this middle section and twelve pages come after it. There are two major dialogue scenes (one with Petrovich, one with the significant personage); the first begins seven and one-half pages from the beginning of the story, the second seven and one half pages from the end. Thus, these sections give the story an underlying symmetrical structure from which one is distracted by letter-writing captains, weak policemen, and ordinary full-grown young pigs.

Source: Carl R. Proffer, "Practical Criticism for Students," in *From Karamzin to Bunin: An Anthology of Russian Short Stories*, edited by Elizabeth Trahan, Indiana University Press, 1969, pp. 12-17.

Critical Essay #5

In the following excerpt, Driessen provides a short summary of Gogol's "The Overcoat," and alleges that the story is about "an unhappy love, through which the hero discovers himself and comes to life."

Although "The Overcoat" is amongst Gogol's best-known stories, a somewhat thorough analysis is not possible without a short summary of the course of the story, with at the same time a rough indication of its construction.

In a certain department a certain oldish, baldheaded, pock-marked little official used to sit, with a "haemorrhoidal" complexion, eternally bearing the rank of titular councillor and the name *Bashmachkin*. His Christian name, Akaky Akakyevich, is just as ridiculous, and Gogol relates in detail how the poor devil got it. How and when he appeared in the department no one knows any more. He is known there solely as a copyist. Since he is weak and defenseless, he is constantly exposed to being teased by his colleagues. He does not however let this disturb his work, namely copying, which dominates all his thoughts.

It was only when the joke got too unbearable, when somebody jogged his arm and so interfered with his work, that he would say, "Leave me alone, gentlemen. Why do you pester me?" There was a strange note in the words and the voice in which they were uttered: there was something in it that touched one's heart with pity. Indeed, one young man who had only recently been appointed to the department and who, following the example of the others, tried to have some fun at his expense, stopped abruptly at Akaky's mild expostulation, as though stabbed through the heart; and since then everything seemed to have changed in him and he saw everything in a different light. A kind of unseen power made him keep away from his colleagues whom at first he had taken for decent, well-bred men. And for a long time afterwards, in his happiest moments, he would see the shortish Civil Servant with the bald patch on his head, uttering those pathetic words, "Leave me alone! Why do you pester me?" And in those pathetic words he seemed to hear others: "I am your brother." And the poor young man used to bury his face in his hands, and many a time in his life he would shudder when he perceived how much inhumanity there was in man, how much savage brutality there lurked beneath the most refined, cultured manners, and, dear Lord, even in the man the world regarded as upright and honourable....

This serious intermezzo from the otherwise comic beginning has been quoted here in full, because it has acquired much notoriety and is usually indicated in Russia as the "humane passage."

After this passage there is a depiction of the happiness Akaky Akakyevich finds in writing. He takes documents home for sheer pleasure and knows no other amusement than copying.

He should consequently have been able to live from his salary of four hundred rubles, if he had not had an enemy, namely the St. Petersburg cold. This forces Akaky Akakyevich, who has never paid any attention to his external appearance, to the discovery that his coat is half worn away on the shoulders and in the back.

A visit to his tailor Petrovich is of no avail for the moment, for Petrovich refuses to mend the overcoat and says that only a new one would be any good. This means an enormous expense, eighty roubles to be sure.

By imposing on himself the greatest privations, drinking no more tea, walking on his toes to save his soles, yes even writing as little as possible at home (for that uses up candles), he succeeds in several months in scraping the money together. During that time something changes in him, his life acquires a purpose, namely the new overcoat. When the dream has finally been realised and the overcoat is ready and Akaky Akakyevich comes to the department unrecognisable, he is once again teased. His colleagues consider that he now has to treat them. A higher official saves him. He is giving a party that evening and invites the whole company. Akaky Akakyevich enjoys the evening only moderately. He leaves before the end and at a lonely spot he is robbed of his new treasure.

Attempts to trace it through the police lead to nothing, a charitable collection amongst his colleagues provides little, the only hopeful possibility is to turn to a certain "important personality." He has only recently been important, is still practising his worthy role and considers he cuts a better figure the more he snaps at lower-placed persons. Akaky Akakyevich, who has not applied to him by the hierarchical path, gets the full brunt of him and when he stutters something in reply, the great man becomes so furious that Akaky Akakyevich totters out of the room horrified.

In the street he catches cold, and dies shortly after from pneumonia.

"And St. Petersburg carried on without Akaky Akakyevich." These words form the introduction to a second humane passage, which—although quoted less often than the first—is no less important.

The story is not yet finished however. Soon there are rumours about a corpse that haunts St. Petersburg at night and robs people of their overcoats without regard to person and even to rank. Finally the "important personality" also falls victim to such a robbery. He clearly recognises Akaky Akakyevich in his attacker. Since then he speaks more gently to his inferiors. After this last robbery, the ghost is no longer seen....

If we wish to venture criticism . . . then we shall have to start from a seemingly slightly modified, but essentially completely different view of Gogol's main figure. This is, in my opinion, possible and necessary. Recognising that Gogol did not copy reality, in spite of the microscopic accuracy of his drawing, assenting that his heroes usually make a static impression and seem to be reduced to a few dominating features, even sharing the conviction that in Gogol death predominates over life, we may nevertheless doubt whether that domination is complete and ask ourselves whether Akaky Akakyevich is

not, certainly to a minimum extent, after all a human being. The answer to this question must, in my opinion, without hesitation be in the affirmative, although he lacks almost everything which makes a person a human being and although the human element in him has been reduced to virtually nothing.

He nevertheless has one thing, even at the very beginning, namely a love. I do not mean that for the overcoat, but that for writing. As a result of this, he is vulnerable. The teasings of his colleagues are so cruel because they strike a living being in his purpose in life, in what gives him a right to recognition. It may be noted that this right likewise applies to an animal, and that we also call a child cruel if it disturbs an insect building its home. Yet Gogol says expressly that his hero is not only diligent, but works with love and forgets himself completely in the process, to such an extent that he has no thought for his external appearance, his food, his relaxation.

Is such a self-forgetfulness conceivable while being directed to such a trifling purpose? Of course it is in the case of a man who has been baptised Akaky Akakyevich, who has the family name Bashmachkin and is predestined to be a titular councillor, who feels his own personality as being so inferior that it is not worthy of the slightest attention, in whom natural love of self has to seek an object and can find it outside its own "ego," yet so closely connected with it that it enjoys its full satisfaction therein. The still infantile copyist finds himself in his writing and without being in the least aware of it, he retires into himself while writing and is at the same time "not himself."

Now the great shocks come in separate phases. Through the cold he is forced to devote attention to his old overcoat. The tailor Petrovich forces him to start thinking of a new one, this need in turn brings him to the discovery of himself. Gogol is very careful in depicting this development. When Petrovich speaks for the first time about a new overcoat, Akaky Akakyevich feels himself "as in a dream" (the expression is repeated), upon hearing the price he utters a cry, "probably for the first time in his life." Dreaming and muttering to himself he roams through the city. Then he recovers and there now begins a new monologue, but this time "not in broken sentences, but frankly and soberly, as though talking to a wise friend." Once he is familiar with the thought of the overcoat, he changes in character, becomes more lively, surer, the undecided element even disappears from his facial expression. He has an aim. This is all the result of the overcoat, his second love. He did not mind suffering from hunger,

for spiritually he was nourished well enough, since his thoughts were full of the great idea of his future overcoat. His whole existence indeed seemed now somehow to have become fuller, as though he had got married, as though there were someone at his side, as though he was never alone, but some agreeable helpmate had consented to share the joys and sorrows of his life.

Upon the approach of the fulfilment, "his heart, which was in general extremely calm, began to beat" and, how could it be otherwise, he becomes unfaithful to his first love, the static element disappears more and more. Thinking about the overcoat, he almost makes an error in copying. On the day on which the overcoat becomes his property,

"the most glorious day in his whole life," for the first time he writes nothing at all in the evening.

He takes the following step when he begins in principle to discover the other world and with it the possibility of a sexual fulfillment. He who had never shown the slightest interest in any event in the street stops on the way to the soirée in front of a shop-window where a picture is hanging. The representation is that of a woman who is taking off her shoe, her *bashmak*, during which process she bares her well-shaped leg.

She is being stared at by a man out of the opening of a door. The reference to the erotic element was even clearer in an earlier version. There a second picture is mentioned, a sequel to the first; the same beautiful woman is represented in it, but she is now lying in bed naked. Akaky Akakyevich smiles. Is it "because he had come up against something that was completely unknown to him, of which a certain consciousness is nevertheless preserved in everyone?" Gogol answers that one cannot know what a person is thinking. It is however not here a question of "thoughts." What is it but a rising up of desire, as a result of which Akaky Akakyevich almost breaks into a trot behind a lady who shoots past him and who shows such an extraordinary mobility in all her limbs? Once again, Gogol finds it necessary to point out twice that his hero does not himself realise from where that wave has come. The fact that there was indeed a definite intention in Gogol's mind appears from the passage which functions as a counterpart to the one just mentioned. After being robbed Akaky Akakyevich in fact sees a half-naked woman who is wearing merely one *bashmak*: his terribly old landlady who "from modesty holds her chemise pulled together over a bosom." A sad contrast with what a few hours ago had been a vague enticement. If we become aware of this contrast, then we suddenly also surmise a hidden intention behind the seemingly arbitrarily chosen example of the teasings of the colleagues, who "told of his landlady, an old woman of seventy, that she struck him and asked when the wedding was to be."

It is, I think, undeniable that all these indications and references point to a process which is taking place in Akaky Akakyevich, the maturing and realisation of which are nevertheless prevented by the loss of the overcoat.

The growth of his personality also appears from quite different things. Before the robbery his increasing personal consciousness is expressed as an unmotivated anxiety; only afterwards does it properly appear how much has changed in him. The shy Akaky gaspingly shouts his reproaches to the nightwatchman. His further reactions to the robbery are likewise completely normal. He does not allow himself to be fobbed off by the commissioner, "wants to show character once in his life," barks at clerks and even ventures to lie that he has come on departmental business. And when he is finally standing opposite the general, this person, the "important personality" is the one who has the most of a puppet about him. The acquired words and gestures of the powerful man are completely mechanical, but the unfortunate one who is shattered by them is a small, nervous man who, sweating from anxiety, defends his last human hope.

This development is not finished with his death. It is not difficult to see that the second part of the short story is, insofar as it concerns Akaky Akakyevich, a fantastic, but logical

continuation of the first, in which he, if only in a feverish dream, had dared to express his anger while dying....

As regards meaning, "The Overcoat" is the story of an unhappy love, through which the hero discovers himself and comes to life. He is a borderline case of what is human, the departmental world around him is mechanical and dead. The ending is the revenge of the living on the dead.

The humane passages are the places where the tragic side of the humour is accentuated. They do not contain the full meaning of the short story, but form the confrontation of the fantastic and "sub"human element with reality. The comic element is through these passages alone raised to humour. If they are looked at away from the whole, then they can only partially be understood.

Gogol's work develops not from fantasy to reality, but it shows the development of a fantasy which absorbs more and more reality and which, having awakened from the dream, continues and illuminates the world of day into its farthest corners. It is a fantasy which can juggle in such a way with the attributes of reality and which knows the rules of the game of reality so accurately that it can in the end hazard comparison with reality which it seems to cover completely, and which is its opposite. Gogol has never lost an opportunity of reminding his reader of the change. This is also in part the meaning of the fantastic ending. In earlier work, what had begun as a dream is confronted with reality, here reality has to account for itself to the dream....

Source: F. C. Driessen, "Gogol as a Short-Story Writer: A Study of His Technique of Composition," in *Slavistic Printings and Reprintings*, edited by C. H. Van Schooneveld, translated by Ian F. Finlay, Mouton and Co., 1965, pp. 182-214.

Critical Essay #6

In the following essay, Stilman gives a short overview of Gogol's "The Overcoat" and contends that the protagonist dies "a death of his own making, defeated in a hopeless struggle against himself."

In the parish register of one of Moscow's churches the entry was made of the death, on February 21, 1852 (March 4, new style), of retired collegiate assessor Nikolaj Vasiljevich Gogol, aged forty-three.

Collegiate assessor Gogol outranked the hero of "The Overcoat," Akakij Akakievich Bashmachkin, a mere titular councilor. Titular councilor was a rank of the ninth class; collegiate assessors ranked one class above.

"The Overcoat" is traditionally associated with a story which, according to the reminiscences of Gogol's friend Annenkov, [P.V. Annenkov, *Leteraturnye vospominanija*, B. M. Eichenbaum, ed., 1928] was once told in his presence: the story of a poor government clerk who after months of privation and overtime work, saved enough money on his meager salary to buy a shotgun, which he lost, however, the very first time he went hunting with the weapon. Unlike "The Overcoat," the story had a happy ending: a new gun was offered by his colleagues to the luckless Nimrod who lay in bed, sick with grief.

Annenkov states, perhaps somewhat too assertively, that the first thought of "The Overcoat" originated in Gogol's mind when he heard the anecdote, "that very evening." Annenkov gives no date, but there is indirect evidence that Gogol heard the story sometime between August, 1833, and June, 1836, when he left Russia, probably during the earlier part of this period.

It may well be that the anecdote reported by Annenkov played a part in the inception of "The Overcoat." But if it did, it was because it fitted into a pattern, because Gogol must have heard in the anecdote a tune, or a theme, already familiar to him: the theme of yearning and frustration, of fate's giving and taking away....

Thus in desire frustrated at the very moment when it is about to be fulfilled Gogol saw a situation essentially grotesque: the hand that stretches out to grasp closes on nothing. Yearning, then short-lived possession (or a mere illusion of possession), and finally frustration is a thematic sequence which often recurs in Gogol's work....

Akakij Akakievich Bachmachkin becomes for a short while the owner of the new and glorious overcoat; he is congratulated and admired. A garment changes the wearer's appearance; a garment is a disguise. But the new overcoat, the thing of fabulous cost and overwhelming beauty which he has desired so ardently, is a precarious possession. Akakij is soon robbed of it (of his "royal mantle"), the illusion vanishes, reality is once more laid bare.

The "real" Akakij, stripped of his disguise, is characterized by coprological [relating to excrement] symbols, especially obvious in the earlier versions of the story. The borrowed identity of the magnificent overcoat is contrasted with the true identity symbolized by the name. In one of the early drafts, the episode of Akakij's baptism and of the choice of his Christian name included the following author's comment:

Of course it might have been possible in some manner to avoid the frequent junction of the letter k, but the circumstances were of such a nature that there was no way at all of doing this....

The name of the letter, in Russian, is pronounced *kab*, and its "junction" gives *kaka*, the Russian child-word for feces. In the earliest known version the "hero" (as yet anonymous) is said to wear a frock coat "the color of cow's pancake" (a popular Russian term for dry cow dung). "At that time," explains the author, "the ukase to the effect that all officials be buttoned up in uniform coats had not yet been issued." In the definitive version Akakij Akakievich wears a uniform, "not green, but some kind of a rusty-floury hue." On the other hand, Akakij's complexion, "reddish" in the first known version, becomes "hemorrhoidal" in the final text.

If Gogol expurgated the definitive text of the more direct coprological comments, he left the allusive name itself emphasizing the inevitability of the choice of the name, the predetermination in its choice. Akakij Akakievich's purchase—and shortlived possession—of the overcoat thus takes on the aspect of a revolt against pre-destination....

In "The Overcoat," Akakij, with his poor man's treasure, is the victim of the robbers and of the General. The plot of "The Overcoat" is a triangular system of collisions, or aggressions: Akakij is attacked by the robbers; Akakij is attacked by the "person of consequence" (the General); the "person of consequence" is attacked by the robber (the reader may choose, according to his preferences and inclinations, between the "supernatural" explanation—that the author of the last aggression was "really" Akakij's ghost; or, if he prefers psychology—that the conscience-stricken General imagined his aggressor to be the clerk who died after his browbeating).

The last aggression is a retribution. It is Akakij's posthumous vengeance and posthumous triumph: he is identified with the robber, a man of great strength and daring; the "person of consequence" is humiliated, and the symmetrical structure of the story is completed.

The earliest known (unfinished) version of the story which Gogol dictated to Pogodin in 1839, in Marienbad, had the title "The story of the clerk who stole overcoats"; the motif of the clerk-aggressor (the poor man snatches the General's possession) was present, consequently, already in that early stage. In the first version of the epilogue, the dying Akakij Akakievich sees himself, in his delirium, facing the "person of consequence"; at times he utters

. . . profanity, expressing himself in the language of a cab driver, or in that language which is ordinarily used when order is being restored in the streets, something he was

never known to do in all his born days. "I don't care that you are a general," he would cry in a loud voice. "I'll take your overcoat from you. I'll complain, . . ."

In the definitive text Akakij is less outspoken: on his deathbed he insults his offender, but does not state his intention to rob him of his coat; he utters

. . . profanity, pronouncing the most dreadful words, so that his landlady, a little old woman, even crossed herself, for never in all her born days had she heard anything similar from him, those words, moreover, following immediately the words "your excellency."

Just as the coprological symbols were veiled in the final version, so the motif of Akakij's posthumous vengeance was made more subtly allusive....

Gogol's Akakij Akakievich died of a fever he contracted when, deprived of his overcoat, he was exposed to the rigors of the Petersburg winter. The parish register already quoted is incorrect, however, in stating that the death of collegiate assessor Gogol was due to a cold. The learned physicians who treated him, and hastened his end, diagnosed *gastroenteritis ex inanitione*. Inanition there certainly was, for Gogol had imposed upon himself rigorous fasting and, toward the end, refused all nourishment. He died a death of his own making, defeated in a hopeless struggle against himself....

Source: Leon Stilman, "Gogol's 'Overcoat'—Thematic Pattern and Origins," in *The American Slavic and East European Review*, Vol. XI, No. 2, April, 1952, pp. 138-48.

Adaptations

"The Overcoat" was made into a film of the same title in 1959 by Russian actor Alexei Batalov. This faithful adaptation was shot in black and white and is available in video format with English subtitles. The film represents an important turning point in the history of Soviet film making, as it reflects a shift away from the overtly political/historical films that had been predominant since the revolution. It won a "Best Foreign Film" award in 1965.

Topics for Further Study

One famous passage in "The Overcoat" describes how one of the clerks in the office is touched by Akaky Akakievich's protest against the teasing from his fellow workers. This passage has been the subject of considerable debate: it seems to suggest that we should feel sympathy for Akaky, but many readers disagree. What do you think?

What is the role of the narrator in this story? How would the story have been different if it were told in the third person? How much like or unlike Gogol do you think the narrator is?

One definition of "allegory" is: "a method of telling a story in which characters and events are meant to represent moral or spiritual concepts more significant than the actual narrative itself." To what extent does "The Overcoat" fit this definition?

Research the philosophical debates in Russia in the 1830s and 1940s between the "Slavophiles" and the "Westernizers." In his lifetime Gogol was associated with the "Westernizers" (represented by Gogol's friend Vissarion Belinsky). Some later readers, however, see Gogol's work as more in keeping with the ideas of the "Slavophiles." Based on "The Overcoat," in which of these two camps would you place Gogol? If you had been a participant in these debates, how would you have reacted to "The Overcoat" ?

Compare and Contrast

1840s: Russia is impacted by two political factions: the "Slavophiles," who support Russian culture and advocate an isolationist view; and the "Westernizers," who view Russia's future in light of Western Europe.

1990s: With the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russia and the surrounding republics that once made up the Soviet Union look to the United States and the European community. Yet some Russians advocate a return to Communism and isolationism as a result of economic failures and food shortages.

1840s: Gogol and other Russian authors struggle to develop a Russian school of literature.

1990s: Russian authors of the mid to latenineteenth centuries are highly regarded all over the world. Gogol, Dostoevsky, Turgenev, and others have had a great influence over subsequent Russian authors and world literature.

1840s: Censorship of literary and journalistic work is commonplace under the Czarist regime.

1990s: Russia is an open society after the fall of Communism and the repeal of harsh repressive laws that had been in place for many years.

What Do I Read Next?

Gogol's story "The Diary of a Madman" ("Zapriski sumassehdshago"), published in 1835, also makes use of the motif of a garment as a status symbol. The story is written in the form of a diary that records the mental deterioration of its writer. At one point the writer, another poor government clerk, believes himself to be the King of Spain, Ferdinand VIII. When he decides to reveal his identity in public, he reasons, "If only I could get hold of a royal mantle of some sort. I thought of having one made but tailors are so stupid.... I decided to make a mantle out of my best coat which I had worn only twice.... I had to cut my coat to ribbons with the scissors since a mantle has a completely different style."

"The Nose" ("Nos") is another of Gogol's short stories which first appeared in his 1842 *Collected Works*.Also a satire of bureaucratic life in St. Petersburg, "The Nose" takes a more absurdist or surreal approach than "The Overcoat." It is the story of a minor bureaucrat who struggles to retrieve his nose after it apparently abandons him and takes on the role of a bureaucrat with a higher rank.

The Government Inspector (Revizor) is Gogol's famous stage comedy, first performed in 1836. It is the story of a drifter who is mistaken for a government inspector by the residents of a small provincial town and showered with bribes until the real official appears. Despite its obvious satire of Russian bureaucracy, Czar Nicholas I loved the play and ordered all his ministers to see it. It has been one of the most highly acclaimed Russian plays ever since.

Notes from Underground is a novella written by the great Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky in 1864. Reminiscent of Gogol's work—"The Diary of a Madman" in particular—*Notes from Underground* is a darkly humorous first person narration of a bureaucrat whose sanity is questionable.

"The Metamorphosis," a story written by Franz Kafka in 1915, shows a great deal of Gogol's influence. It is a disturbingly surreal and satirical depiction of Gregor Samsa, a poor office worker who wakes up one day to find himself transformed into an insect.

"Gogol's Wife" is a short story published in 1961 by Italian avant-garde writer Tommaso Landolfi. Well-known as a critic and translator of Russian literature, Landolfi creates a fictional narrative to explain the mystery surrounding Gogol's love life. The real Gogol never married and there is little evidence that he ever felt romantic attraction toward anyone. In "Gogol's Wife," Landolfi makes up some evidence—in the form of an account from a fictional acquaintance/biographer of Gogol's—that suggests that Gogol had a very bizarre love life indeed.

Further Study

Ehrlich, Victor. *Gogol*, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1969.

Excellent overview of Gogol's work and the development of the author's views throughout his life.

Fanger, Donald. *The Creation of Nikolai Gogol*, Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1979.

Analyzes Gogol in the context of his times and cites interesting evidence from both published and unpublished writings by Gogol in discussing the author's creative genius.

Maguire, Robert, ed. *Gogol from the Twentieth Century: Eleven Essays*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1974.

The essays in this book represent the most influential twentieth-century critical assessments of Gogol. Included in the volume are two essays by Russian scholars from the first half of the century which offer very close readings of "The Overcoat," emphasizing the formal aspects of Gogol's technique. The editor's introduction summarizes critical debate about Gogol from its beginnings in the nineteenth century through the 1960s.

Nabokov, Vladimir. *Nikolai Gogol*, New York: New Directions, 1944.

This mostly biographical study, written before Nabokov became an internationally famous and best-selling author. In addition to information about Gogol's life, the book offers several sections of critical analysis, including some on "The Overcoat." Nabokov describes Gogol as a strongly visual writer and emphasizes his stylistic excellence, concluding that Gogol's work "is a phenomenon of language and not one of ideas."

O'Connor, Frank. *The Lonely Voice*, New York: World Publishing Company, 1962.

A short story writer himself, O'Connor gives a fascinating critical analysis of the short story genre through history. He devotes considerable attention to Gogol and "The Overcoat," which he considers an early masterpiece of the short story form.

Stone, Wilfred, et al. *The Short Story: An Introduction*, New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1983.

This textbook is an anthology of short stories arranged chronologically, beginning with ancient myths and ending with experimental short fiction from the 1960s. Its introduction and entries entitled "Nikolai Gogol" and "The Short Story Proper: The First Age" offer much insight into "The Overcoat" and its role in the development of the modern short story form.

Troyat, Henri. *Divided Soul*, translated by Nancy Amphoux, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1973.

This authoritative study explores the connection between Gogol's life and his work, emphasizing the ways in which Gogol's works reflect the author's lifelong search for spiritual wholeness.

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Stone, Wilfred, et al.*The Short Story: An Introduction*, New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1983.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

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