

The Problem of “The Overcoat”

Examining Gogol's Work and His Influence on Nineteenth-Century Russian Literature

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“Problem” is a misnomer. *Problems* is more like it. Centuries of criticism and approach, definitions and eras all come before Nikolai Gogol and stop, stumped and frustrated. First, there is the problem of the man himself: a dynamic character, famed for his off-putting personality and religious zeal near his death that intelligentsia approach in discomfort. Then there is the problem of genre. How can a writer be both realist and Romantic, symbolist and modern? One might throw up her hands and sigh, “Why bother with this classification?” But the question becomes imperative when one considers the influence Gogol had on the great masters of Russian prose that followed him: Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Chekhov. “We all come out of Gogol’s Overcoat,” Dostoevsky presumably said of his own work and the work of his peers. What of Gogol is in Dostoevsky’s philosophy, Tolstoy’s morality, and Chekhov’s realism?

Gogol may at first appear as a wall of incomprehensible, pretentious literary maneuvers placed side-by-side in jarring contrast; however, he meshes such devices together so that the reader is compelled to dig and exclaim “Eureka!” when striking upon why he included this bit and that in the whole of the story. In fact, Gogol makes use of such dissonance and contradiction to engage the reader in the question of purpose: *why write this?* Thus it is fruitful exercise to play the game of classification with Gogol, for this game illuminates the craft of his intentions and the purpose of his art.

“The Overcoat” epitomizes this struggle in criticism. Some contend that it is a genius work of social realism (in detailed focus on the mundane and impoverished with a political spin). Others, in defense of the anti-formalist approach, would note that Gogol was a conservative himself, if he had any political slant at all (Simmons). Nabakov perhaps might fall among the ranks of these, for in his criticism he classifies Gogol as a modern absurdist whose mimesis

reflects Gogol's own individual truths, understandings, and experiences (Simmons). Perhaps the most far-fetched lens of interpretation is religious symbolism, which was not yet established as a literary movement at the time of Gogol's writing (Simmons, de Jonge). Formalists would reject all these, instead drawing upon a close-reading of "The Overcoat" and noting the paradoxical truths expressed in a seamless hodgepodge of devices and styles. (This is not to be confused with an aesthetic approach, for meaning and purpose are vital in the discussion of nineteenth-century Russian literature.) Thus, as de Jonge notes, the problem of Gogol is that all interpretations—with few concessions—do not overlap or agree or even coincide in any neat manner; a critic must favor one approach over another.

Belinsky, that famous Russian critic, hailed "The Overcoat" as realism, spurring its audience to reform. He was quick to see "The Overcoat" as a scorning satire of the ineffective and aloof Russian government (Simmons). However, Belinsky let his own political ideology temper his reading (Ayers). Still, there is much to be said in the case of "The Overcoat" as realism or social realism. To argue this point, one must first divorce realism in the sense of Western European literature (and return to it later in discussion of Chekhov) from the Russian, say, Belinsky's, understanding of realism. To the early nineteenth-century Russian individual, according to Ayers, inward philosophy (read: idealism) permeated outward experience; there is none of this objectivity prized in Western European literature where instead a critical attitude toward reality will do. Thus the notion of social realism creeps into the discussion, though one would struggle to parse the politics and ideals of Gogol. The author himself, in his preface to *Dead Souls*, must be the source on the use of this lens:

All those things that an indifferent eye fails to notice—all the slimy march of petty occurrences into which we sink, all the multitude of splintered everyday characters who swarm along the drab, often painful road of life—he [the author] shows them clearly in relief, thanks to the power of his merciless chisel, so that the whole world may view them... his contemporaries cannot understand how much spiritual depth it takes to present a picture of the despicable aspects of life and make a work of art out of them. (Gogol 331)

Thus Gogol partly identifies himself as the “objective” if not selective observer of life, but he cannot help but have a response—emotional or otherwise—to his observations. Gogol “[conveys life] with laughter, which the world can hear, while seeing it [himself] through tears it never suspects” (tr. MacAndrew 332).

Enter Akaky Akievich, the primary protagonist of “The Overcoat” who, small in all things, lives for his job: copying. “In his copying, he saw a varied and agreeable world” (Gogol 313). Even in his contented state, the reader is stirred to pity pathetic Akaky, which is a hallmark of social realism (de Jonge). If one should question this, consider the narrator’s tangential inclusion of “one young clear, just recently hired,” who “in his happiest moments” would recall Akaky and hear his complaint along with the words “*I am your brother.*” This clerk “shuddered at how much inhumanity there is in man, how much savage coarseness is concealed in delicate sophistication and—dear God!—even in men whom the world sees as honorable and noble” (Gogol 312-313). In light of such moralizing empathy, the reader, too, balks at the cruelty of society, but is not impassioned to social reform, but rather to personal examination. Gogol does not champion the overthrow of bureaucracy or Tsar; he could if he wanted to! Consider the tale’s

resolve with the Very Important Person. The incident with Akaky's ghost frightened him not to abandon his post or examine the Russian government as a whole, but the Very Important Person returns to his role with humility (Gogol 330). Therefore, it is not by definition *social* realism; but how can one even call it *realism* with this supernatural denouement?

Before answering this, please allow some digression into discussion of form, which is still pertinent to understanding "The Overcoat" as realism. The picaresque may yet be the solution. Baumgarten describes "The Overcoat" as a picaresque with its mundane subject matter, rough characters, and episodic narrative. Yet the critic also acknowledges a tone unbefitting of a traditional understanding of this form, noting the Homeric, lyrical style often adopted by the narrator. (We shall return to Baumgarten's thesis later). Belinsky defined the uniquely Russian "tale" as a form that suited an ethical analysis—with Gogol being the master of this form (Ayers). A tale such as "The Overcoat" contains exhaustive description of lower-class lifestyle portrayed in a sympathetic light, even through humor or sentimentalism (Ayers). All of this circles back to social realism, except that we are stumped again by Akaky's impossible ghost. Ayers would argue that the supernatural ending is still mimetic as realism is in that it captures the characters' and readers' naturally arisen response to such a tragedy. One critic went so far as to claim that the supernatural ending is just the author mocking the audience: the ghost is really a thief, but we are willing to suspend disbelief in order for Akaky to have justice (Proffitt). Perhaps we would call this meta-social realism, but there is little in-text support for this theory. As far as the reader knows, it is indeed Akaky's ghost that haunts St. Petersburg and the Very Important Person. Thus, one is inclined to throw "Romantic realism" into the mix with a certain hope, as critic Donald Franger does; he includes Dostoevsky, Balzac, and Dickens in this combined

genre. Romantic realism would allow for a foray into the supernatural, for a lyrical tone, and for a sentimental point-of-view.

Then there is Chekhov, as master of realism in the Western European sense. What of Gogol's uniqueness survives in Chekhov? Consider Chekhov's short "tale" (as Belinsky might have defined it) "Misery." Like "The Overcoat" it focuses on a inconsequential, impoverished urban man, and like "The Overcoat" the plot and purpose depend upon the man's misfortune. Yet unlike the prose of Gogol, the narrator remains objective, neither taking on personality or entering the mind of the protagonist. For example, "Iona fidgets on the box *as though* he were sitting on thorns" and "turns his eyes about *like* one possessed" (Chekhov 148). These similes (emphasis added) distance the narrator from the heart of the character, placing it in terms of observation rather than internal emotion, like the despair and agony of Akaky once his coat is stolen. Chekhov is truly the "realist" in the sense that Gogol is not. Yet what links them is the emotional disturbance, the crux of their themes. One reads the final lines of "Misery" — "The little mare munches, listens, and breathes on her master's hands. Iona is carried away and tells her all about it" (Chekhov 151) — and one is struck to the core emotionally, entering into the coldness and injustice of man personally, despite Chekhov's aloof tone. So it is with Gogol, who was fixated on the lowly and ignoble of mankind. Especially in comparison with Pushkin's Romanticism, or at the very least "loftiness," Chekhov is more akin in subject and theme to Gogol. Chekhov might also be one to lament, "Lucky is the author who, bypassing dull and repulsive characters, sadly real though they may be, is drawn to those who personify the highest human values" (Gogol 331).

Alas, something must be said (unwillingly) of the symbolist approach to Gogol's story, though this style of criticism has of late fallen out of fashion with Gogol's work. Most of these saw in Gogol the religious zealot prescribing an ascetic lifestyle in "The Overcoat." Akaky was living a pious, vocational life, and thus a godly life until his want of an overcoat. The overcoat could be said to represent worldly passions that distract and detain a man in the way a mistress does; or, as it indeed *was* said, "Akaky Akakievich's new overcoat was really his mistress" (de Jonge; Simmons 45). His foray into this sensual lifestyle leaves him vulnerable and ultimately leads to his tragic demise (de Jonge). But even symbolist critics concede Gogol's knack for accurately portraying St. Petersburg, or Russia or Ukraine, or the provincial or urban life—they acknowledge his "realism" (de Jonge). In discussing Gogol's influence on succeeding Russia prose, this lens of interpretation is fruitless; no other author is analyzed like this (at least, not popularly).

A formalist approach to Gogol's literature, which abandons adherence to any one genre, best handles the problematic nature of his work in that it acknowledges the paradoxes and contradictions of style and content, and better still utilizes these in thematic pursuits. Consider these late twentieth-century commentators' understanding of the beauty of Gogol:

Gogol is the master of this prose imbroglio... The Russian genius for movement, which is one of the great features of Russian literature... never allows Gogol's style to get really stuck; there is always a drama on foot that you know will not let you down, and in the meantime the rhapsodies, the inventories, the interpolated anecdotes, and the huge Homeric similes that are whole short stories in themselves are managed with a great sense of rhetoric, so that they do not hold

anything up, and they always become in some curious way organic parts of the story." (Wilson 41-42)

Here are realism and fantasy, humor and pathos, laughter and tears exquisitely proportioned in a symphony of fiction the perfect artistic unity of which is perhaps flawed, according to some tastes, only by the introduction of the supernatural at the end where Akaky's ghost seeks the stolen overcoat. (Simmons 85).

In focusing solely on the literary techniques and aesthetic devices Gogol employs, one has a whole and fluent lens for interpretation in that the apparent dissonance is not examined as a mistake or failing on part of the author but as the intent, if one is to even worry about such things. The art stands and is recognized for its artfulness.

"The Overcoat" is a masterpiece of juxtaposition. Consider Akaky Akakievich in contrast with the Very Important Person. The lowly one is named; the lofty one is delegated a descriptor. Even though Akaky's name is a point of ridicule, as "the name may strike the reader as rather contrived or far-fetched" and his surname comically derives from the word "*bashmak* (shoe)," the other man is not even afforded the dignity of a name (Gogol 311). Over time, as one can assume that this narrator tells the story as events passed, posterity cannot even remember the "official position of this Very Important Person," whereas the ghost, name, and legend of Akaky Akakievich remains well-known among the supposed people of St. Petersburg (Gogol 325, 328). Thus there is indeed justice for the wronged and obscure Akaky, even if it is only the social conscience and not in the actuality of a ghost taking the overcoat from the Very Important Person. Gogol signifies, even in such a bleak story, some hope for the good of mankind, that we

should want or seek justice, be open to reprove, and be empathetic toward our fellows. Amidst tragedy in the tale, there is also redemption. The coat may serve as a symbol for this concept. After bringing home the new coat from Petrovich, “he took out his old, worn-out ‘peignoir’ for comparison. He looked at it and laughed, so comical was the difference” (Gogol 321). The old coat is an old, uninspired way of life, albeit content. A new world of possibilities is opened to him through the new coat: the night life, a social circle, even women! (Gogol 320-322). But then tragedy strikes when the coat is stolen, and it seems the whole world turns away from his plight. Yet there is redemption in that the Very Important Person, the person responsible for Akaky’s ultimate fate, relinquishes his own overcoat to the ghost (Gogol 330). The Very Important person is humbled, and therefore redeemed, and the ghost of Akaky is avenged. And in the same way, Gogol places stark reality and unimaginable fantasy side by side in a single narrative. Through these juxtapositions, it is as if Gogol were pointing his fingers to contradictions of mankind, that the same person is capable of good and evil, of lowliness and nobility, of contentment and aspiration. The reader is forced to acknowledge the duality of life.

This theme is further developed in the voice of the quirky narrator. He plays upon the duality of reality through irony, wordplay, digression, and the meshing of tones and styles. After recounting how Akaky Akakievich was named, deadpan he states, “We have mentioned it so that the reader might plainly see that everything occurred in an inevitable way and that it was utterly out of the question for him to have any other name” (Gogol 312). He reveals truth through a falsehood, thus twisting the understood perception of reality. At several points in the narrative, he digresses into seemingly unimportant accounts of the goings-on of St. Petersburg. For example, even after the neat wrap-up of the ghost and the Very Important Person’s encounter, he

introduces one random “sentry in Kolomna” who “saw with his own eyes the apparition come from behind a house.” The ending lines of the tale—such pivotal placement!—seem to negate the sentry’s claim, for “this apparition was much too tall and had a huge mustache; and turning in the general direction of the Obukhov Bridge, it vanished into the darkness of night” (Gogol 331). In the span of a few sentences, the narrator seems to acknowledge and deny a claim or reality. The ghost in and of itself calls into question the perception of reality, but this apparently useless digression is included to build upon the theme that life and experience have a sort of dual nature, that perception is not indicative of truth.

In this manner, a particularly Russian form of prose arises, thanks to the work of Gogol. Dostoevsky and Tolstoy follow in this vein. They collect from their surroundings, from the history and setting of Russia, but they in theme and in purpose are not limited to these contexts, as a social reformist or realist reading might have us assume. These authors also express dualities and paradoxes that lean toward realism in expression (in that life-mimesis would be by nature contradictory), but they intentionally direct the reader toward broader realities and truths. In the final lines of “The Death of Ivan Ilych,” this mundane and even reprehensible life is given Christlike meaning:

“It is finished!” said someone near him.

He heard these words and repeated them in his soul.

“Death is finished,” he said to himself. “It is no more!”

He drew breath, stopped in the midst of a sigh, stretched out, and died. (Tolstoy 797).

Until then, the story centered in the impartial relation of a man's life and suffering. Tolstoy seamlessly interweaves a supernatural occurrence in the saying of "someone near him" and chisels the meaningless life of Ivan Ilych in relief against the meaningful life of Christ. As Gogol's work is not limited to commentary on Russian bureaucracy, Tolstoy's story is not just meant as a subtle imprecation against the Russian middle class. It is like Gogol in that it utilizes the mundane and everyday to reveal higher truths and initiate personal reflection in the reader.

Dostoevsky, from whom supposedly originated the quote, "We all come out of Gogol's Overcoat," walks upon the ground broken by Gogol. Considering *Notes from the Underground*—a unique addition to this discussion because of its first person point-of-view—it still yet follows the pattern of concern with trivial men or mundane subject matter yet extracts the highest significance from their stories. In fact, Dostoevsky does this in excess. The man from the underground, our tortured narrator, mentions his toothache. This brings him to contemplate human suffering and the purpose of it. "The person suffering expresses his pleasure in these groans," he says; "if he didn't enjoy it he wouldn't be groaning... he himself knows that his groans will not bring him any kind of relief" (Dostoevsky 16-17). He goes on to comment on the goodness or evilness of a man in suffering, or even his control over his actions in light of his suffering. Dostoevsky's literature is philosophy discussed in the plainness of humanity; this path for him was forged by Gogol, who bestowed majesty and nobility on his "odd heroes" (Gogol 332). Gogol began this pattern of giving meaning to the banal, especially in break with Pushkin, in which nineteenth-century Russian prose continued to tread.

"The Overcoat" as the highlight of Gogol's literary career demonstrates and initiates the pattern of nineteenth-century Russian prose. The problematic nature of his work arises from the

problematic nature of criticism and perhaps Gogol's fragmentary biography or ideology. However, a formalist approach to his work centers not on the biography of the author nor the context of his writing, but the higher truths, themes, and purposes as revealed in his excellent art and craft. Gogol's "Overcoat" is especially noteworthy for its fluid grip with the apparent contradictory nature of life and reality and how the literary techniques he employs so exquisitely display that. Thus, he influenced a generation of Russian writers who followed him in this pattern of scooping from the commonplace and assigning great meaning to it.

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Ayers argues that while recent criticism has removed Gogol from the ranks of realists in the Western European tradition, Gogol's "The Overcoat" possesses certain mimetic qualities that, according to his Russian contemporaries, would earn him the

branding. She often references Russian critic Belinsky, who was one of the first to hail Gogol as a realist; Belinsky himself identified social criticism as a hallmark of realism, and elaborated on how the Russian form known as “the tale” could singularly convey multiple perspectives, genres, and points of evaluation seamlessly so that the reader may utilize ethical analysis. (Need I draw the connection between social criticism and ethical analysis?) Ayers enumerates a few points of apparent juxtaposition in Gogol’s tale that allow for such ethical analysis, and thus redefines “The Overcoat” as a sort of Russian realism.

Baumgarten, Murray. "Gogol's 'The Overcoat' as a Picaresque Epic." *Dalhousie Review* 46.2 (Summer 1966): 186-199. Rpt. in *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism*. Ed. Jessica Bomarito and Russel Whitaker. Vol. 162. Detroit: Gale, 2006. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 9 Sept. 2016.

In pursuit of genre, Baumgarten’s analysis of Gogol’s “The Overcoat” leads the critic to amalgamate picaresque realism with the Homeric lyric epic. Baumgarten denies any application of traditional understanding of realism to this story, given that the wandering and capricious tone of the narrator does not allow for facts to be simply put. Yet the novel is picaresque in its lowly subjects and characters—bureaucracy, a copywriter, poverty and the working class—as well as its episodic focus. Seamlessly,

Gogol blends the mundane with the Homeric in epic similes that, whereas Homer compares the epic with the familiar to elicit empathy, grant heroic qualities to our poor protagonist Akaky.

de Jonge, A. "Gogol." *Nineteenth-Century Russian Literature*. Ed. John Fennel. Berkeley And Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973. Print.

De Jonge enumerates three lenses of interpretation for Gogol that conflict with each other, though they make concessions: social realism, sprinkled with romantic fantasy; religious symbolism that accurately captures contemporary Russia; formalist analysis focused on his employment of literary techniques and aesthetic devices. Thus he applies these three lenses to "The Overcoat." Social realism notes that we are stirred to sympathy for this small, overlooked bureaucrat lost to unfeeling Russia, notes also the elongated descriptions of lower-class living, but can make nothing with the fantastic, supernatural ending. Religious symbolism observes that Akaky was living a pious life before worldly passion in the form of the overcoat distracted and detained him the way a mistress would her lover. Thus, his foray into the sensual leaves him vulnerable to his demise. Formalist critics would note that "The Overcoat" is a masterpiece of juxtaposition: Akaky and the Important Person; tragedy and salvation; reality and fantasy; and so on.

Proffitt, Edward. "Gogol's 'Perfectly True' Tale: 'The Overcoat' and Its Mode of Closure." *Studies in Short Fiction* 14.1 (Winter 1977): 35-40. Rpt. in *Short Story Criticism*. Ed. Anna J. Sheets. Vol. 29. Detroit: Gale, 1998. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 9 Sept. 2016.

Proffitt conspiratorially calls into question the fantastic and “perfectly true” ending of Gogol’s “The Overcoat.” He claims that Gogol is satirizing the reader’s desire for poetic justice by playing upon both the reader’s and the St. Petersburg citizens’ naive suspension of disbelief. He enumerates the evidence for Akaky’s ghost being no ghost at all but a clever thief. Thus the narrator condescendingly joins in with the audience that seeks to neatly close a sad tale that truly has no happy, meaningful ending.

Simmons, Ernest J. *Introduction to Russian Realism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965. Print.

Simmons chronicles the problematic nature of criticism when encountering Gogol’s work, especially over time. Belinsky, that famous Russian critic, hailed him as the social realist, perhaps suiting his own bent. Then the symbolists claimed Gogol as one of their own, a forerunner. Psychoanalysts examined Gogol’s quirky personality and strange biography in explanation of the liquid nature of his work. Soviet critics saw him as a Russian Nationalist, but at last Nabakov’s definitive novel on Gogol completely rejecting realism as a genre, but instead classified him as an absurdist—a modernist

before his time—whose mimesis reflected Gogol’s personal reality, not outward truth. Simmons himself favors a realist understanding of Gogol’s literature especially in light of his tragic themes and portrayal of human nature. However, he would not have us classify Gogol as a social realist, but rather Simmons believes the author pushes us to personal, moral examination as opposed to reform.

Wilson, Edmund. *A Window on Russia*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972. Print.

Insofar as Gogol is considered the father of Russian prose, Wilson presents that Gogol’s style is genius in its purposeful, labored intricacy. Borrowing from western European traditions and yet owing much to his Ukrainian upbringing and contemporary Russian setting, Gogol seems indefinable because he truly invented the style of the nineteenth-century Russian novel. (Pushkin was too contemporary with Gogol to be considered a proper influence, and Gogol’s poetry is negligible.) He is markedly influential on generations of Russian writers to come, especially Dostoevsky and Tolstoy.