



A Critique on Nikolai Gogol's The Overcoat

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Abstract: This study investigates Gogol's *The Overcoat* from various perspectives. The paper explores the origin of the story, its place in Russian literature, and the socio-economic background of the society when it was written. In addition, the paper aims to provide an overview of the style employed by Gogol to write *The Overcoat*, a psychoanalytic critique of the story, and the realistic and romantic elements used in it.

IndexTerms – Nikolai Gogol, The Overcoat, Akaky, Russian Literature

I. AN INTRODUCTION TO THE AUTHOR AND HIS REPERTOIRE

Nikolai Vassilyevich Gogol was born on 1st April, 1809 in the village of Sorochintsy, Mirograd District. Ukraine. He was named after and lived up to the name of St. Nicholas, the Wonderworker. In December 1828, he fled to St. Petersburg to eke a living for himself. At this time, for want of money, he was compelled to take a minor position in the Government Services to support himself. It was this first-hand experience with the workings of the Russian bureaucracy that we see reflected in stories such as *The Nose* and *The Overcoat*. In 1830, he published his first tale *St. John's Eve* in the March issue of a magazine 'Fatherland Notes'. This was followed by two volumes of 'Evenings on a Farm near Dilkanka' in 1831 and 32, each containing four tales on exclusively Ukrainian themes. They were an immediate success and made the young provincial artiste a famous writer.

Baron Delvig, friend of the celebrated poet Pushkin introduced Gogol to Pushkin in 1831. Pushkin was full of admiration for the young writer. In a personal letter addressed to him, he said- "Here is real gaiety- honest, unconstrained, without mincing, without primness. And in places, what poetry! What sensitivity! All this is so unusual in our present day literature that I still haven't recovered." At 22 therefore, Gogol was well received and commanded an enviable position in Russian literary society. In 1835, came 'Mirogorod', another two-volume collection of Ukrainian tales and 'Arabesques', a group of articles and tales reflecting the life of Petersburg. This collection included 'The Diary of a Madman', 'Nevsky Prospect' and 'The Portrait'. He had also begun work on the novel-poem 'Dead Souls'. When Pushkin started publishing his magazine in 1836 he included Gogol's stories.

In June 1836, at the height of his fame, Gogol left Russia for Switzerland, Paris and Rome. Of the remaining 16 years of his life, he spent nearly 12 abroad. He returned in the fall of 1841 to see the publication of the first volume of 'Dead Souls'. In 1842, a four-volume edition of his collected writings was brought out. In the third volume was our story for discussion, 'The Overcoat'.

Now it must be kept in mind that this young genius' art was born at the crossroads or intersection between his native Little Russia and the Industrial Petersburg. Richard Pevear commenting on his technique said and inspiration said- "He (Gogol) did not write from within Ukrainian popular tradition: he wrote looking back at it. Yet he also never entered into the life of the capital, the life he saw flashing by where 'the devil himself lights the lamps only so as to show everything not as it really looks'. Being on the outside of both worlds, Gogol seems to have been destined to become a pure writer".

His modernity is unmistakable and maybe seen in two ways. First, his works are free verbal creations based on their premises rather than on the conventions and trappings of other 19th century works of fiction. Secondly, he was highly theatrical in his mode of presentation. This may be traced to the fact that his father was a playwright and he himself, an amateur actor. His stories are full of social and psychological realism. It is no wonder then that he was widely regarded as the father of Russian modernism years before the movement itself set in. Such is Gogol's transcendental expertise that Andrei Bely in the 20th century remarked- "We still do not know what Gogol is!" Extremely sensitive to the condition of human nature and psyche, the writer himself once remarked thus- "I am destined by the mysterious powers to walk hand in hand with my strange heroes, viewing life in all its immensity as it rushes past me, viewing it through laughter seen by the world and tears unseen and unknown by it."

II. SOCIO HISTORIC BACKGROUND IN GOGOL'S TIME

At the time when Gogol's writings were gaining acceptance in popularity in Russian society, there was a simultaneous revival of interest in what was 'provincial'. There was a vogue for writing about the provinces and Little Russia. The novelist Narezchny had recently published two comic novels portraying Ukrainian life and customs. In 1826, Orest Somov published a series of tales based on local folklore. Anton Pogorelsky used the Ukrainian landscape for a volume of fantastic tales titled 'My Evenings in Little

Russia' in 1829, all this interest in the provinces is justified as the provinces offered an ideal combination of the native and exotic: real and fantastic: peasant earthiness and pastoral grace.

III. ORIGIN OF THE STORY

As for the origin of the story, the information given by Pavel Annikov, Gogol's friend has found general acceptance. According to him, at a party Gogol heard the story of a poor official, whose passion for a rifle motivated him to suffer great privations.

Finally, he managed to buy a rifle for himself and set out in a boat to go duck hunting. But then he dozed off and the rifle slipped into the water. This loss so disheartened him that he became seriously ill and was on the verge of death. Only when his colleagues took up a collection and brought him a new rifle did he finally recover.

It is quite possible that Gogol replaced the gun with the overcoat on the basis of his own experience. He did not have a winter coat in 1830 and had to endure the cold in his summer coat.

IV. PLACE OF THE OVERCOAT IN RUSSIAN LITERATURE

One of the most influential short stories ever written, 'The Overcoat' or 'The Cloak' first appeared in 1842 as part of a four volume publication of the author's collected works. It is considered an early masterpiece of Russian Naturalism and a precursor to the modern short story form. Dostoevsky and Turgenev are rumored to have said that-"We all come out from under Gogol's 'Overcoat'", thereby making their tribute to the first and finest exponent of the genre. The story itself is a perfect example of Gogol's inimitable style. It is a blend of reality with fantasy. However, it begins innocuously enough, in the mundane, monotonous and mechanical world of St. Petersburg's bureaucracy, the plot soon gains momentum and finally moves into a world of supernatural retribution and wish-fulfilment. The Overcoat is therefore, at once, humanitarian, a moral tale, a parable and a social satire.

V. RELEVANCE OF THE TITLE

The Overcoat is shown as emblematic of the class structure and rigid hierarchical difference inherent within Russian society. In addition, it is the context of the story, which makes the title all the more relevant. In a city such as St. Petersburg where the climate extremities control the individual's dress, and where clothing is the means of survival and resistance against the fury of nature, overcoats in general, could mean the difference between life and death.

VI. STYLE

Gogol has been proclaimed the founder of the school of natural expression and also lauded as the painter of reality. His prose is characterized by an inexplicable self-consciousness. In Russian literature, memory is generally the medium of storytelling and the storyteller's act of telling his story is frequently a retelling after the event itself is over. This is the conventional procedure. However, with Gogol, memory plays no part. He does not map out a definite story line before sitting down to write. He innovates and experiments as he goes along with the story. That is why he digresses so much. In 'The Overcoat', he digresses often to give us interesting tidbits and insights such as how Akaky got his name and what the stereotypical habits of the Russian working class are. He thereby scorns the traditional style of writing. There is no unity of action or formal coherence. Of his unconventional methods, critic Sinyavsky says, "The accent shifts from the object of speech to speech as a process of objectless intent, interesting and exhausted by itself. Speech about useless objects enters the conscious and shifts the reader's attention from the matter to the means of its verbal organization. His (Gogol's) speech is therefore in a pure sense, about everything and nothing at all."

A close reading of 'The Overcoat' shows us how many stylistic devices the author employs in his writing. So much so, that it seems deliberately crafted. The ones that are apparent to one who is not privy to the original story in Russian, but is familiar with the English translation alone, are hyperbole, anti-climactic statements, incongruity, fantasy, pun and a sardonic sense of humor and dry wit. Examples for the above in the same sequential order are: "Nothing gets angrier than all kinds of departments" and "She (Petrovich's wife) was emitting so much smoke, that you couldn't even see the cockroaches!" for hyperbole. Even at that time when everything is striving to amuse itself, Akaky Akakiyevich didn't commit himself to any amusement." "He burst into tears and made such a face as if he had a premonition that he would be a titular councilor"- this remark is made by the author persona following the birth of the baby Akaky. These two are examples of anti-climactic statements. Pun and incongruity are found aplenty in the names of the characters themselves. A completely drunk Petrovich is referred to as "being up to his eyes in vodka!" Gogol's sense of dry humor and wit comes to the fore when he makes a telling comment on the bigotry of Russian bureaucracy. While introducing Akaky, he says - "As for his rank. (for with us, rank must be announced first of all), he was what is called, an eternal titular councilor." Again, "As the child was being baptized, he cried and made such a face as if he anticipated that he would be an eternal titular councilor."

VII. THE OVERCOAT AS A MOTIF AND THEMATIC SYMBOL

Akaky's overcoat is an object of mockery. The clerks "deprived it of the noble name of overcoat and called it a housecoat". Meant to serve as cover and protect its wearer from the bitter Russian winter, this overcoat is an antithesis. However as the story progresses, it soon goes from being a symbol for degeneration to a kind of Sisyphean ambition and means of spiritual nourishment. "...he was nourished spiritually, bearing in his thoughts, the eternal idea of the future overcoat. From then on, it was as if his existence became somehow fuller." Just the mere thought of the overcoat becomes empowering and emboldens him. Gogol tells us, "Doubt, indecision - in short, all hesitant and uncertain features-disappeared of themselves from his face and actions. Fire occasionally showed in his eyes, the most bold and valiant thoughts even flashed in his head."

The overcoat thus becomes a symbol of his rebirth and its subsequent loss leads to his early demise. Its his fierce, almost burning desire to possess the overcoat in the manner that a love-crazed hero might pursue the woman of his dreams, that eventually takes the story into the realm of the supernatural. Even in his other life as a ghost, Akaky continues to be driven by the desire to possess and avenge the loss of his precious overcoat while still alive. He makes away with the expensive coat of the Person of Consequence. Gogol makes a wry, tongue-in-cheek remark here when he says, that the spirit of Akaky was finally satiated. He becomes bigger and taller in death by fighting for what he wants rather than giving up meekly and once again reclaims that state of ecstasy he felt when he wore the new coat for the first time.

VIII. REALISTIC AND ROMANTIC ELEMENTS

The Overcoat is a perfect blend of realistic and romantic elements. These elements are intertwined in the story in such a way that it tends to grip the readers until the end and hold their interest.

Realism Elements

The reaction of the Person of Consequence after his friend leaves seems very realistic. Sometimes influential people do feel sorry for those in compromising situations and feel regret after having scolded them with such intensity But then they get on with their lives. So does the person of consequence in the story. When he comes to know of Akaky's death he goes to amuse himself at his friend's place. The pastimes of Akaky's colleagues seem to be very realistic unlike Akaky's leisure time activities. They play cards, go out for movies and gossip. However, the timidity of Akaky seems to be an exaggeration of realistic. Another realistic element is when narrator claims not to know what Akaky is thinking about the picture on the window.

Romantic Elements

The name of the main character being Akaky is one of the several romantic elements in the story. It resembles Kaka or the defecator. The portrayal of Petrovich as a 'devil' figure is quite romantic. He acts as an agent of transformation who tempts Akaky into 'sinful' pleasures and brings a change in his listless life. Some people may love their work but probably do not get obsessed with it like Akaky. A horse has to snort over his shoulders or he has to run into a cop to realize he is not engaged in copying.

The apartment of Akaky's colleague also romantically represents the warmth of his new life and attitude. However, a little later towards the end of the story the appearance of the streets before Akaky loses his coat is represented as gloomy which helps in creating a romantic environment congenial to the progression of plot.

IX. PSYCHOANALYTIC CRITIQUE OF THE OVERCOAT

The Overcoat is represented as an inclusive symbol of human passions and needs. Throughout the story, there is a psychological depiction of human emotions or psychological states.

The return of Akaky's ghost is symbolic of resurfacing of repressed guilt- an image to represent the feelings of remorse connected with treating someone like Akaky with insufficient compassion.

In the first part of the story, we notice that Akaky is very religious about his work. Nothing other than his work fascinates him more. But then, Akaky's love for the overcoat awakens in him erotic experiences. He chases a charming lady and looks at an erotic picture in the window of a store. Prior to this Akaky had only one object of desire - the overcoat and only one pre-occupation - obtaining the overcoat. However his other dormant desires manifest themselves only later in the story when he manages to get the overcoat for himself. Therefore, there is a metonymic displacement of libido.

The best way to analyze this story is to look at it from the Freudian perspective. Akaky's behavior can be explained with the help of Freud's theory of Psycho-sexual development. The plot of the story seems to progress in a similar fashion. The main character of the story: Akaky seems to be in anal stage in the beginning of the story, in which he has a kind of **Anal Fixation**. A person may have either an Anal Retentive personality or Anal Expulsive personality. People with anal-retentive personality are stingy with a compulsive seeking of order and tidiness. The person is generally stubborn and perfectionist. Akaky's behavior seems to reflect this. He used to do his work with utmost perfection and paid a lot of attention to it.

"The young clerks jeered and made jokes at him. It had no influence on his work; in the midst of all this teasing, he never made a single mistake in his copying."

Latency stage is a period where sexual drive lies dormant. During the latency period, children pour this repressed libidinal energy into asexual pursuits such as athletics and same-sex friendships, Akaky's sole pursuit of getting an overcoat for himself never lets his sexual desires to come to the fore,

Then later he progresses to **Genital Stage** where the interest turns to developing heterosexual relationships. We do not see Akaky courting a lady in the story however we do see him looking at an erotic picture of a Woman: which is something that Akaky seems to be incapable of doing in the first half of the story.

This story can also be analyzed in terms of **Hierarchy of Needs** given by Abraham Maslow, a humanist psychologist. In the levels of the five basic needs, the person does not feel the second need until the demands of the first have been satisfied or the third until the second has been satisfied, and so on.

We encounter such a hierarchy as the plot progresses in the story. After having bought himself a new overcoat Akaky apparently feels comfortable and safe and takes pride in wearing it. His brand new overcoat invites attention of his colleagues and he becomes the center of attraction. He becomes a part of the group. He is no more just an ordinary clerk who wears a tattered coat

and is invited for a get-together. He gets to know other people and socializes with people who work with him in the same office yet were unknown to him. He is known now. However not even once in the story we see Akaky as someone who fights for himself. He is projected as an ordinary human with an extra-ordinary ability to take life as it comes; he does not complain. Nevertheless, it does not mean he had no potential for all this. We never see Akaky standing for his rights and fighting against the odds. When he re-appears as a ghost he is much more aggressive - a personality trait which remained dormant until he was alive. Sadly, Akaky could realize his true potential (**Self Actualization**) only after his death.

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