

AKAKY AKAKIYEVICH

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Akaky Akakiyevich

(In Gogol's *The Overcoat*)

Agreeable

Overview Nikolai Gogol (1809-1852) was a Russian dramatist, short story writer, and novelist, whose origins were in a small village in present-day Ukraine. (He was of Ukrainian-Polish ancestry, the source of lasting disputes concerning the national culture to which he belongs.) He was long considered a founder of 'Russian literary realism,' a master of telling it like it is, but the element of the surreal, in much of his work, has shifted the emphasis onto Gogol the 'modernist.' Throughout his work there is a strong thread of social satire; novels like *Dead Souls* (1842) and a play like *The Government Inspector* (1836) eventually led to his exile from Russia.

Character Akaky Akakiyevich is a government employee, whose job is to copy official documents, and whose title was *titular councilor*. (*Titular councilor* was Grade 9 out of 14 grades in the hierarchy of Government positions established by Peter the Great in 1722.) We see this little man on the totem pole as part of a strict administrative system, in which he personally plays no role—except after his death, as it turns out. The great issue of his totally routine life becomes getting a new overcoat—for it is cold in St. Petersburg in the winter, and his bones are aching. The great tragedy of his life is his naivete, which makes him forget the dangers of big city life; he lets himself get mugged and loses the overcoat for which he has sacrificed all the rubles he has.

Parallels Akaky is both naïve and a victim, and it is perhaps little surprise that parallel characters, in literature, are predominately female: reflecting social history, but nothing more fundamental than that. Sex loving Fanny Hill might do as a first parallel, for in Cleland's novel *Fanny Hill*, 1748, the young lady who discovers the world of organized sexual pleasure first meets us as a wide-eyed ingénue, amazed by the new urban life of her times. The same kind of robust innocence meets us in Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), or even in Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891): in both fictions the female protagonist finds herself swept up into male desires, though the two women deal very differently with this loss of self-determination. Finally there is the most stunning example of naivete in Wilbur the pig--E.B.White's *Charlotte's Web* (1952)—an innocent if there ever was one.

Illustrative moments

1 Anonymous We first meet Akaky as a nameless and faceless government employee—'a certain official in a certain department'—with only a few traits: 'short of stature, somewhat pock-marked, red-haired, and mole-eyed, with a bald forehead, wrinkled cheeks, and a complexion of the kind known as sanguine.' He was the kind of employee no one notices, and who, because he was thoroughly self-effacing, made no effort to make himself known. Even in the choice of his name it was decided that he should be named for his father, who was also a government official.

2 Humble Appropriately enough, given his appearance, personality, and position, 'it would be difficult to find another man who lived so entirely for his duties...he labored with love.' He liked precisely the repetition-part of his job, the copying exactly, so that on one occasion, when his supervisor rewarded him, by assigning him the duty of making a few changes in a document, Akaky 'broke into a perspiration, rubbed his forehead, and finally said: 'No, give me rather something to copy.' 'After that they let him copy on forever,' to his lasting satisfaction.

3 Poor Akaky likes his copying job, but the winters are killing him, and he has no wife to keep him warm. Finally he goes to his tailor, once more, to request a patching up of his present overcoat, which is itself not much more than a collection of patches. This time Petrovitch, who is hungover and in a bad mood, tells Akaky that no more patching is possible. The coat is threadbare, and he will have to make

Akaky a new coat. 'Where was the money to come from? He must have some new trousers, and pay a debt...to the shoemaker for putting new tops on his old boots...'

4 Thrilled After a visit with the tailor to various cloth merchants and other retailers, and after reviewing the meager finances in his piggy bank, Akaky commissions his new coat. The day on which the tailor brings the new coat, is 'probably the most glorious one in Akaky Akakiyevich's life,' and a day on which 'the severe cold had set in, and threatened to increase.' The timing was perfect, and when Akaky went to work that day, and hung up his new coat on the way in, his fellow workers rushed to inspect the new garment.

5 Mugged The assistant to the head clerk, in Akaky's office, offers to throw a party in celebration of Akaky's new coat, and off Akaky goes, suitably overcoated, to a late night drinking, feasting, and whist-playing party, of the sort he was totally unaccustomed to, and at which he felt out of place. Finally at midnight he slipped away and headed home, through streets which—as they approached his modest neighborhood—grew increasingly dark and unpeopled. As he was crossing a dark square two ruffians attacked him, stripped him of his coat, and knocked him unconscious in the snow. He leaped up, shouted, and ran to the night watchman, but it was too late. Despair.

Discussion questions

What is Gogol's attitude toward Akaky's loss of his overcoat? Is Gogol on Akaky's side, or simply acting as an objective observer of life? How can you tell?

If Gogol sympathizes with Akaky—I think he does—does this mean that Gogol is also a social critic, judging the social setting in which Akaky lives and works?

Could this story have been set in the contemporary West? Or does it remind you of the cultural environment in which Franz Kafka (1883-1924) placed characters like Joseph K, in *The Trial*?

Reading [http://central.gutenberg.org/articles/the_overcoat_\(short_story\)](http://central.gutenberg.org/articles/the_overcoat_(short_story))