

# THE GOVERNMENT INSPECTOR

Nikolai Gogol

**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 actually 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.

**Story** *The Government Inspector*, published in 1836, shows us Gogol at his most ironic/comedic/critical.

As the story opens, a small town has been hit by startling news: a government inspector, probably traveling incognito, will be visiting their city on an inspection tour, and everything possible should be done, the mayor urges, to clean up the town, to hide evidence of bribery, and to make a generally good impression on the capital.

The director of the local hospital cleans up his patients, and posts signs over their beds, in Latin, identifying the names of their diseases. The judge, the local assessor, the school headmaster: all are put under notice that they need to clean up their acts, *fast*. Upset by the sharp implied criticisms of their professional work, these various city officials turn on the mayor himself, reminding him that he regularly accepts bribes, and that recently he has had the wife of a noncommissioned officer flogged.

In the midst of this internal conflict, the local postmaster comes in, to see if there is news about the arrival of the inspector. The mayor advises the postmaster to open and read all incoming mail, to find out, if he can, who the inspector is, and when he will arrive. (The request is unnecessary because, as the postmaster replies, he opens all letters anyway.) At this point, an official hurries in with news; a mysterious gentleman has for two weeks been lodging at the local inn. Who knows what damage can already have been done, what malfeasance, on the part of the town, may already have been recorded and reported?

The mayor immediately assumes that the gentleman in the inn is the feared inspector—instead of a foppish shyster, who has no idea, at this point, that he has been mistaken for someone else. Even in his ignorance, the impostor Kleshtakov gladly accepts the munificent offers of the mayor: he moves into the mayor's house, accepts largish loans from the frightened official, and flirts outrageously with the mayor's wife and daughter.

At this point Kleshtakov is drawn into a more substantial relation to the town. Local Jewish merchants, sick of the improper official behavior of the mayor, ask Kleshtakov to help get the mayor dismissed from office, to which Kleshtakov replies that the mayor should be sent to Siberia in chains. (Kleshtakov is careful to collect some 'loans' from the merchants, while he is at it.) The mayor, terrified now, begs Kleshtakov not to have him arrested, and at this point realizes that Kleshtakov has become engaged to the mayor's own daughter.

On short notice we learn that Kleshtakov has returned to St. Petersburg, having been advised by his valet, Osip, that the game is getting too dangerous. As Kleshtakov races away, the mayor's cronies arrive to congratulate him. The mayor feels on top of the world, lording it over the local merchants, until, surprise!!, the postmaster bursts in again, with news of Kleshtakov's identity, and of his scorn for all of them. The mayor, badly humiliated, strikes out in fury at his associates. While this altercation is taking

place, a letter arrives from the real Inspector, who is on his way, and who wants to meet with Mr. Mayor immediately.

## Themes

**Gullible.** The mayor and his fellow officials have every opportunity to investigate the mysterious gentleman who arrives at the inn, but in fact the whole governing team of the town accepts the initial assumption, about the identity of the visitor. It is not until the postmaster opens the fatal letter from Kleshtakov, that the ruling officials realize how badly they have been had.

**Opportunistic.** Until the arrival of 'Kleshtakov,' and the false rumors about his identity, the ruling 'elite' of the town are quite content with their system of bribery, and with the convenient shortcuts by which they ran their hospitals and schools. Once the fear of god has gotten into them, these folks turn into little angels overnight.

## Characters

**The Mayor.** The Mayor of the town is a self-centered, money-grabbing politician who is chiefly interested in keeping his job. He does his best to hush up the sins of the city, so that the 'visitor' will not discover them, but he is incapable of even questioning the identity of the visitor. When he realizes that he has been totally duped he is predictably enraged.

**Kleshtakov,** the 'inspector,' is an unscrupulous scam artist, who eagerly plays the role accorded him by stupid local officials. Having pushed his luck, and feathered his nest, to the max, he takes the advice of his valet and gets out of town fast.

**KHLESHTAKOV** (Disagreeable)

**Character** In his *Directions for the Actors*, Gogol writes that Khleshtakov is 'a young man of twenty three, thin and slender, rather foolish—who is known as scatterbrained...He is incapable of concentrating on any subject.' The play revolves about a misunderstanding, whereby Khleshtakov, who has stopped at an inn in a small Russian city, and who is living it up there, is mistaken for the awaited and dreaded Inspector General, whom the Government is sending around to check on local communities. Khleshtakov is treated with fear and munificence by a community wrongly thinking he is a figure of importance sent to inspect their community.

**Parallels** Odysseus in Homer's *Odyssey* returns to Ithaca in disguise, as an old homeless man, just before harvesting the lives of the indolent suitors in his house. He carries about him the same mystery and power as Khleshtakov accidentally acquires. The motif of the character who is deeply misinterpreted crops up in Hans Christian Anderson's *The Emperor's New Clothing*(1833), the Emperor supposing, incorrectly, that he is elegantly dressed, not just naked as he is. Knut Hamsun, in *Mysteries*(1892), introduces us to a mysterious visitor to a small town, a person of power and fascination, who is unbalanced. *The Man who Came to Dinner*(1942) highlights a moody and irascible gent who finds himself an unexpected overnight guest, and stays forever.

## Illustrative moments

**Self-indulgent** We first meet Khleshtakov as he enters his hotel room to find his cheeky manservant, Osip, insolently stretched out on the master's bed. The master is frustrated; for several days he has been charging all his hotel bills, food included, claiming that he is a government official and that his account will be taken care of. None of his is true, but as we meet Khleshtakov he is raging: the hotel refuses to continue sending his meals to his room. He senses that a good scam—which he can't yet comprehend—is sooner or later to come to an end.

**Misunderstands** In the midst of Khleshtakov's altercation with the hotel waiter, about the dinner items he has just ordered, the Mayor of the town comes to Khleshtakov's hotel room. He is making a courtesy

call, to see that this guest, who the Mayor believes is the Inspector General from Moscow, is being well taken care of. (He assumes that this mystery figure is spending a few days incognito, so that he can scope out the community.) Khleshtakov, however, assumes that the Mayor has come to give him trouble for his failure to pay up, and for his lavish life style in the hotel.

**Exploiting** Khlestakov continues—as he will toward near the end of the play—not to understand where the Mayor is coming from; he protests that he will take care of his bills. He does not yet realize that the Mayor has the greater fear—inspection of his corrupt town-- and so he is surprised when the Mayor (and the other local functionaries) agree to lend him money—to pay his hotel bill. He is in fact surprised to discover that the Mayor and his friends are kissing his ass big time. They will not even sit down in the presence of Khleshtakov, and the Mayor invites him to dinner.

**Flabbergasted** Khleshtakov remains flabbergasted by the fine treatment he is receiving—he licks his lips enthusiastically while he eats the select fish dinner the Mayor has invited him to—but he pushes his discovery limits along with his risks. He asks the Mayor whether there are organized betting games, like bridge, in town—because Khlestakov wants some fun—but the Mayor, and the town council, cover their asses by denying the existence of any such tomfoolery in their (totally corrupt) town. Mutual confusions hold this play in a very tight half-nelson.

### **Discussion questions**

When does Khleshtakov finally understand the reason for his extraordinary treatment in the hotel? Is he surprised by this treatment or does he take it in stride from the beginning?

Is Gogol making a point about the deceptions of self-understanding or about the stupidity of politics? Or do both critiques coincide? Who—or what group—is the primary dupe of the plot?

Is there a moral tucked inside this splendid comedy, which works like a double-edge sword? Should Khleshtakov have made more fervent efforts to find out why he was seemingly 'winning the lottery'? Or was he justified to take his winnings as they came, and to keep his mouth shut?

**Reading** Gogol, *A Government Inspector*, Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, London, 2012.