

KHLESHTAKOV*Frederic Will, Ph.D.***Khleshtakov** (in Gogol *The Government Inspector*) Disagreeable

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.

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

1 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.

2 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.

3 Exploiting Khleshtakov 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.

4 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.

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

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?