

# THE OVERCOAT

## 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 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** Gogol's *The Overcoat* (1842) narrates the life, and ultimately the death, of a little clerk; one might think of Bob Cratchitt, in Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (1843), or of Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener* (1853), or even, to update the eternal tale, of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949), all of them tales of little guys struggling along semi tragically in little corners of the society. Nowhere than in fiction do we gain a sharper understanding of the social loser, whose special alienations begin to announce themselves with the advent of the Industrial Revolution in the early 19th century.

The main character is a clerk and copyist in a large bureaucratic office in the Russian capital of the time, St. Petersburg. Akaky is often the butt of his colleagues' jokes, because his overcoat is terribly threadbare; he goes once more to his tailor, Petrovitch, to have a few more patches added, but Petrovitch, unwilling to work any more with the old rag, tells Akaky he must buy a new overcoat. Akaky is so excited, by the prospect of having a new overcoat, that for a while he is unable to concentrate on his copying, at which of course he is a perfectionist, and at last a considerable salary bonus makes it possible for him to act realistically on his desires. He and Petrovitch make a tour of the Petersburg shops and decide on a fine coat for Akaky, and the purchase is made.

Akaky's boss decides to host an office party, to celebrate Akaky's acquisition of the coat. After the party, where of course Akaky—the ultimate retiring nerd—shrinks back and feels miserable, Akaky starts out for home. It is a dark night, much later than Akaky is accustomed to being out, and in the course of his walk the clerk is attacked by a pair of toughs, who steal his coat and leave him sprawling in the snow.

Akaky turns to the authorities for help in recovering his overcoat, but is passed from office to office, meeting everywhere with indifference. He is finally advised to see a certain 'important' person, a recently promoted general, known for shouting at his subordinates, in order to boost his own ego. After keeping Akaky waiting, for a long time, the general demands of him why he has raised such a trivial issue as the overcoat. Akaky then makes an imprudent response, concerning the bureaucracy he is facing, and is so roundly bawled out that he nearly faints, and staggers away from the government office. Not long after this encounter, cold and feverish, Akaky dies in the midst of a dream, in which he is cursing the general.

After Akaky's death, a corpse, which people identify with Akaky's ghost, starts to appear here and there throughout St. Petersburg, snatching people's overcoats and disappearing with them. The last assault the ghost makes is on the general himself, whose overcoat is snatched with glee. Akaky is not seen again.

Gogol's presentation, of an obvious enough point, that the little guy always gets screwed, but is vengeful and often effective in the end, is subtle and convincing. That is the miracle of the story. Nothing cliché. Nothing that doesn't draw you on with fascination.

### Themes

**Withdrawal.** Society is hard on the guy who hangs back, and is on the outside. Akaky is the universal little man, doing a small job in a small slot. No one pays attention. He simply copes. Society is hard on this guy.

**Resilience.** The little guy is seldom completely whipped, but preserves within some kind of desire for revenge, or for another kind of equalizing of the inequality of his existence.

## Characters

**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.

**Petrovitch** is Akaky's tailor, who warns him that it is time to get a new overcoat. Petrovitch and Akaky comb the streets of Petersburg, in search of a suitable, and affordable, replacement overcoat.

**The general** is the classic dehumanized bureaucrat, who berates Akaky for troubling him with such a trivial issue as the overcoat. In the end, as we learn, the general has begun to feel remorse, for the way he behaved toward Akaky.

## MAIN CHARACTER

### AKAKY AKAKIYEVICH (Agreeable)

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**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

**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.

**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.

**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. . .'

**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.

**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))