

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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NIKOLAI GOGOL

(1809-1852)

Works

Drama

The Gamblers. 1836

The Government Inspector. 1836

Essays

Woman. 1830

Preface, to first volume of *Evenings on a Farm.* 1831

Fiction

Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka, vol. I

Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka, vol. II

Arabesques. 1835

The Nose. 1835-6

The Overcoat. 1842

Dead Souls. 1842

Biography

Gogol was born in a village in the Ukraine, in 1809. His mother descended from an army officer family, and his father, a member of the 'petty gentry,' was an amateur writer and playwright. Following in the footsteps of his parents, Nikolai was bilingual, both a Russian and a Ukrainian speaker.

In 1820 Gogol went on to A School of Higher Art in Nezhin, a place where he began writing, and acting. He was not a popular boy--the dominant nickname for him was 'the mysterious dwarf', but he had a few close friends. He was, it appears, tremendously ambitious. In 1828 Gogol went to St. Petersburg, where he made premature efforts to get himself published. In 1831 he had the privilege of an introduction to Pushkin. It was in St. Petersburg that Gogol was able to bring out the first volumes of his short stories, and a couple of volumes of miscellaneous prose. On the whole he was being viewed, during this time, as a Ukrainian rather than a Russian writer. He himself furthered this national characterization, surrounded himself with Ukrainian friends, and developed a passion for Ukrainian history.

In 1834 Gogol was appointed to a professorship in Mediaeval History at the University of St. Petersburg, but he was totally unprepared and after a year resigned his post.

Between 1832-1836 Gogol wrote a lot, deeply under the influence of Pushkin, and gradually came to be thought of as a Russian, rather than Ukrainian, author. In 1838 his play *The Government Inspector* was published to great acclaim, and sealed his commitment to literature.

From 1836-1848 Gogol traveled extensively in Germany and Switzerland, and particularly in Rome, for which he developed a great love, avidly studying Italian, and opera. He fell into a passionate homosexual love, suffered terribly at the death of his lover, and equally at the death of Pushkin. In the following years Gogol worked on his long novel, *Dead Souls* (1842), and on a wide variety of short stories, including his best known, *The Overcoat* (1842).

In 1848 Gogol, whose religious bent had long been deepening, returned to Russia from a trip to Jerusalem. He travelled restlessly throughout Russia, visiting old friends, and ultimately falling under the influence of a *starets*, or spiritual elder, who convinced him that his writing were the inspiration of the Devil. On the strength of this insinuation, Gogol burned most of the unpublished second part of *Dead Souls*.

Achievements

Prose. From the middle of the 18th century until the third decade of the 19th, Russian literature is a literature of poetry. The outburst of prose after 1830 is largely attributed to Gogol, whose *Overcoat*, in the opinion of Dostoyevsky, was the true opening of the power of prose into Russian literature. For nearly the remainder of the century, after this time, Russian remained a prose literature.

Satire. Gogol's *Dead Souls* is a scathing satire on eccentric foibles—the foibles of those from whom Chichikov attempted to buy credits for dead serfs. The *Inspector General* mocks the imperial bureaucracy, fear and mistrust toward which led to the whole comedy of the Inspector General's fraudulent stay in the hotel of a 'small Russian town.'

Ukrainian. Gogol was born in Ukraine, for a long time wrote both in Ukrainian and Russian, and for a long while devoted himself passionately to the study of Ukrainian history. His powerful short story, *Taras Bulba*, anatomizes the heroism of unyielding Ukrainian Cossack soldiers, who fight to the death against the Poles. Gogol remains a point of great literary reference in today's Ukraine.

Descriptive. Gogol's style not only brings prose back to the center of Russian literature, but generates rich new linguistic strategies for romanticizing and characterizing the effects of nature, scenery, landscape. Gogol's own apprenticeship in nature descriptions sprang from the studied word portraits he created in his early *Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka* (1831, 1832).

Themes

Conservatism. Though Gogol satirized such institutions of Imperial government, as that of the Inspector General, who travels around through the provinces, he remained on cordial relations with Tsar Nicholas, who after all was the chief support of the production of *The Inspector General*. Like most comic geniuses, who are attuned to foibles, Gogol saw the value in standards, and in the status quo.

Supernatural. Gogol was sensitive to the presences of the supernatural. We see this from one end to another of his work: from the ghostly appearances that dramatize the night sky in *The Overcoat* to his late in life susceptibility, to the *starets*' claim that Gogol's work had been produced by the Devil and should be destroyed—as most of the second part of *Dead Souls* was.

Fantast. We are likely to burst our seams with laughter, as we peruse Chichikov's wild efforts to find takers for his 'dead souls' business. We are also likely to be surprised that Gogol intended to top *Dead Souls* with a volume—which would have been a *Purgatorio* out of Dante's imagination, and which would show, through Chichikov, some of mankind's efforts to rise to a higher level of spirituality.

Quixotic. Chichikov, as we see above, is in a sense a model of fallen man. He is also, however, a comic-quixotic character, who wanders across his country, at the beck and call of inspiration, in search of deals to make through his 'dead souls' business. While thinking like a mediaeval knight, Chichikov is at the same time sharply self-conscious, even self-mocking, like Don Quixote himself.

Characters

Two Gogol characters before us fit together like hand and glove. Each of them—**Akakiyevich** (in *The Overcoat*) and **Khleshtakov** (in *The Inspector General*)—is a little man who gets caught up in the system,

business or government, and emerges from it. It matters not that Akaky emerges stripped of all he owns; what matters is the satirical portrait of the little man par excellence, wrapped up in his clerk role, in a large office, spending his days copying texts, an activity at which he has become proficient, and in which he finds fulfillment.

Akaky's one dream is to get a new overcoat, so that he can tolerate the bitter winds of St. Petersburg; and toward the acquisition of such a coat he works night and day. He saves his money, goes to his tailor, and finally wears home a sturdy overcoat. Gogol masters us into knowing that a tragedy lies ahead, and it does. On his way home from an office party, Akaky is mugged, and his coat is stolen. No efforts from the local police are of help. The worst has happened. The pathos of the little man has been completely described.

The *triumph* of the little man is described in *The Government Inspector*, the story of a simple traveler who in the course of voyaging checks into a provincial hotel at just the time when the government inspector is expected. The locals flock to flatter and spoil the 'inspector,' who has the power to propose legislation favorable to them, and Khleshtakov only slowly realizes what a bonanza he has stepped into. Treated like a king, the little guy makes the most of this comical case of mistaken identity.

Where is Gogol going, in creating these characters? He is seeking out ways to embody his observation; that the new 'modern' society of his time creates a Chaplinesque little man whose destiny is a rubber ball tossed alternately up or down.