

The overcoat: symbolism in "the overcoat"



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In his short tale "The Overcoat," Nikolai Gogol has unfolded tragedies as well as satirical jokes by imagining a wide range of roles an overcoat can fulfill within an oppressive, bureaucratic, and heavily materialistic society. Without loss of humor, he has shown his reader different perceptions of an overcoat as a simple necessity for decent life, an object beyond admiration, a tenuous tie between a man and his "brother" (Gogol, 29), and perhaps worst of all, a cause for the rage of ghosts. Along those playful exaggerations, however, Gogol also turns the overcoat into a motif that expresses his serious concerns for the well being of humanity, and eventually such concerns also distinguish themselves from all comedies within his tale. To set the tragic tone of the story, Gogol appears to his reader as an omniscient and anonymous third person narrator who observes the parallels between Akaky Akakievich, an impoverished clerk, and his worn-out overcoat, which often represents the image of himself within society. The narrator notices Akaky's overcoat is mocked by others as it is becoming "threadbare" (Gogol, 5), and to prevent it from falling apart, Akaky has to use its collar to patch all other damages on it. In "The Overcoat", such a strange, absolutely "zero-sum" way of tailoring, besides explaining the variegated look and the reduced collar on Akaky's overcoat, also seems to reflect a pattern that is typical within Akaky's destitute life. Indeed, as the hemorrhoidal complexion of Akaky's face reminds the narrator of Akaky's birth in a humble family, his low rank, and his old age, the narrator exclaims "No help for it!" (Gogol, 1) not simply out of his sympathy for Akaky's physical appearance, but rather it is because he realizes that in a society which depends virtue upon rank, family influence, and perhaps also upon good physical appearance, there is simply no way for Akaky to advance

himself in his life. Within such society, Akaky's only merit is his neat handwriting, and as the story develops, the narrator suggests that Akaky's life has become as hopeless as his broken overcoat is, especially when Akaky finds it impossible to compensate for all his inherent disadvantages by working diligently as copying clerk: as this kind of role is nearly negligible within his society, his achievement is usually not recognized. Thus from the narrator's view, Akaky's hard work only appears to further degrade his life, and therefore it is no better than patching an overcoat with its collar.

Moreover, by revealing Akaky's reluctance to change a document from third person into a letter in first person, the narrator has also attested to the belittling effect that Akaky's work has produced upon him. The narrator characterizes Akaky's obsession with his copying work as his desperate resort for avoiding any other misfortunes in his life. From this point, the narrator reaches the taciturn conclusion that Akaky is so oppressed by society that he even lacks the courage to tell his own story or to write down anything that would resemble it, and as most people surrounding Akaky are ignorant of his diminishing existence, the narrator also questions whether individuals who share Akaky's suffering will ever be known by their fellow human beings if he did not bother to include any of them in his story. The irony of Gogol's narration arises not only from its mockeries of the old overcoat, but also from its matter-of-fact sounding description and its facetious dramatizations of Akaky's new overcoat. Gogol has devoted much of his story to emphasize a new overcoat's pragmatic appeal for Akaky.

Through the narrator's cold, merciless voice, Gogol affirms the indisputable fact that Akaky needs a new overcoat in order to survive the harsh winter and to protect himself from the scornful remarks of his co-workers. Gogol

describes how Akaky's frequent visit to the tailor Petrovich and his persistent endurance of months of hardship, with a clear vision of an ultimate goal in his mind, have finally afforded him the luxury of a new overcoat. To give the story a more realistic feel, Gogol even depicts every bit of details of the new overcoat, such as its material, its glossy, attractive texture, and its sturdy quality, as if all aspects of the new overcoat have been carefully examined from Akaky's perspective within the narration. What Gogol is concerned about, however, is certainly more than reality: after venturing into Akaky's earthly life, he immediately creates a sharp contrast between Akaky's physical and spiritual world by turning the materialistic image of an ordinary overcoat into something much more edifying within the story. For example, in a quite oxymoronic sense, Gogol portrays Akaky's endeavor for acquiring a new overcoat as some effort through which he "was nourished spiritually" (Gogol, 10), which only seems to indicate how purposeless his life would otherwise become without the ordeal of a new overcoat. To further exaggerate such unusual significance of an overcoat, Gogol also mentions Akaky's cheering co-workers, who have suddenly become amiable towards Akaky, begin to congratulate Akaky for his new overcoat and are even willing to throw a party for it, as if they are enchanted by some magical power and have all mistaken the overcoat as Akaky's wedding ring. Apparently, by stretching the role of an overcoat much beyond what is usual in Akaky's life, or rather, by endowing it with the ability to perform all kinds of miracles, Gogol has told a slightly absurd story, but with all those absurdities as intentional contradictions to reality, Gogol also exemplifies the limitations of materialism without being didactic to his reader. Towards the end of the story, as Akaky's new overcoat vanishes along with his "brotherly" relation

between his co-workers, Akaky is again plunged into his deep abyss of misery. Gogol shows that Akaky's abundance in material wealth has in fact neither truly dissolved his isolation from other humans, nor has it enriched him spiritually or procured him any happiness other than satisfying his most basic human needs. Thus as an overcoat within Gogol's story, perhaps somewhat mystical, turns out to be nothing more than an overcoat, the reader can also clearly sense that even if Akaky's new overcoat were never robbed away, he would still end up with a tragic, unfulfilling life — if an overcoat was all Akaky had asked for, or regrettably, if it were the most valuable gift the world could offer him. Besides recounting Akaky's particular grievance, Gogol also adds to his story a rather phantastical ending by reporting thefts of several other overcoats, all of which further resonating with his discontent against a corrupt, oppressive society, even though all those incidents are trivial compared to Akaky's immense misfortunes throughout his life. Near the conclusion of the story, Akaky is single-mindedly focused upon searching for his new overcoat, and he does not notice his other losses at all until he meets the "important person" (Gogol, 16), someone who would prefer to entertain his friend out of boredom rather than hearing Akaky's complaints. Although this can be seen as a criticism for ineffective bureaucracy, within the context of the story, it also reminds the reader that while Akaky needs a decent overcoat to meet the "important person," he does not even have a friend who can lend him one. Had Akaky not met the "important person," he probably would never realize how much his obsession with materialistic life has alienated him away from society. Through such a scenario, Gogol illustrates how excessive materialism not only causes isolations and indignity among humans, but also results in

blindness towards its damages to humanity. Furthermore, as Gogol depicts how "the important person" at the end has merely lost his overcoat, and as a result, has saved his own integrity and his family by returning home, he also seems to insinuate that no matter how many overcoats a ghost Akaky can rob, those overcoats will never be adequate to repay for what Akaky has lost in his life. Finally, as Gogol arrives at the possibility that all humans and ghosts in his story, despite the antagonisms among themselves, are actually victims of the Czarist regime, he also asks his reader to judge whether Akaky and other ghosts, no matter "dead or alive" (Gogol, 20), should be punished "in the harshest manner, as an example to others" (Gogol, 20). By skillfully using overcoat as a motif in his story, Gogol has asked many important questions about humanity. As Gogol describes how lonely and hopeless Akaky has become more and more preoccupied with his overcoat and eventually collapses, he frowns upon Akaky's futile life, but at the same time he also questions how one could escape the viscous cycle of spiritual poverty and excessive materialism, each appearing to be simultaneously the cause and the effect of the other. With ghost Akaky's rage towards others, especially towards the "important person," Gogol is perhaps suggesting that humans should be responsible for helping each other to avoid such repulsive pattern of life, that is, figuratively speaking, they should avoid suffering by using their long handled spoons to feed each other instead of only trying to satisfy their own needs. Gogol's story, however, also implies that fulfilling this obligation is not easy when many individuals like Akaky are totally isolated from society. In addition, by mentioning the ruthless manner that the Czarist regime seeks to punish even the ghosts, who are most likely non-existent, Gogol also blames the regime for its severe oppression against

humanity and questions whether humans should also be responsible for resisting such oppression, if they were to be held responsible for their own well-being. It is hard to imagine how Gogol could ask those excruciating questions and criticize the bureaucratic and overly materialistic influences of society without utilizing his good humor to soften the threatening tones of his story. Gogol's humor has undoubtedly saved his work from doctrinarism, trivial objections, and perhaps even censorships, or in Gogol's most general term, one could also say that it is the power of humor that has enabled Gogol "to avoid any unpleasantness" (Gogol, 1) in "The Overcoat".