

Analysis of gogol's 'the overcoat' essay

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In the nineteenth century, much of Eastern Europe had a fascination with Slavic folk beliefs. During this time, people questioned the existence of mythological creatures, especially those which were believed to be somewhere between dead and alive(3). The word “ vampire” was introduced in to the Slavic languages in the late eighteenth century and the term “ unclean forces” began to be widely recognized by nineteenth century Russian peasants (1). References to Police reports involving different variations of fiends rising from the dead, often to attack local villagers, were not viewed as unrealistic(3). This attraction to the supernatural strongly impacted writers of the nineteenth century and the occurrences of unnatural phenomena became a popular theme in Russian literature.

Gogol's well known short story, “ The Overcoat”, is one example of these Slavic folk based stories. While the majority of “ The Overcoat” is an ironic tale about a simple clerk whose obsession with his overcoat eventually causes his death, the ending of the story, where a corpse is believed to begin haunting the town of St. Petersburg is perhaps the most interesting and controversial part of the tale. To readers in the twenty-first century, who are unfamiliar with Slavic folk beliefs, the ending might be viewed as bizarre and unexpected when in fact; the ending to the story is brilliant.

Virtually the entire plot of Gogol's story is conditioned by Slavic folk ideas which can be used to better understand the fantastic ending of “ The Overcoat”. Central to Slavic folk beliefs were “ unclean spirits” and the devil. Unclean spirits, which were most commonly viewed as manifestations of the devil, were feared for their ability to take over a person's soul(4).

Not everyone was considered equally susceptible to the evils of these unclean spirits. The way that one lived their life determined their vulnerability. The young, the unmarried, and those who lived a life of solitude were among the most defenseless, whereas those who were old, married, and who surrounded themselves with children and friends were considered the safest from the devil's antics(4).

At the opening of "The Overcoat", Gogol describes the main character of the story, Akaky Akakievich. Gogol depicts Akaky Akakievich's life at work, his home life, and even what he liked to do in his spare time. The only problem is Akaky Akakievich appears to have nothing else in his life other than his work. He is truly one-dimensional. At work, he is described as "always seen in the same place, in the same position, at the very same duty". On his walk home from work, Akaky Akakievich is said to have been in such deep thought about "his clear, evenly written lines" that it takes a horse sneezing on his cheek for him to realize that he "was not in the middle of his writing, but rather in the middle of the street".

While the lingering thoughts of a workday might be explainable on the walk home from work, Gogol goes on to write that even when Akaky Akakievich reached home, while everyone else was out enjoying their leisure time, Akaky Akakievich simply ate dinner and "[went] to bed, smiling at the thought of the next day and wondering what God would send him to copy". Akaky Akakievich is more relatable to a Xerox machine or a robot than an actual human being. He displays no emotion toward anyone or anything.

Instead, his life revolves around his undemanding work. Despite Akaky Akakievich being well into his fifties, his solitary lifestyle would have made him highly susceptible to the influences of the devil in Slavic folk traditions. Later on in the story, the arrival of the St. Petersburg cold weather causes Akaky Akakievich to feel a chill on his back and examine his winter overcoat. He realizes that it is in need of a repair, so he takes it to the local tailor, Petrovich, who Gogol craftily hints to the reader is either the devil or, at the very least, an unclean spirit (2). Gogol, who is known for his ambiguous hints throughout his stories, never bluntly reveals that Petrovich is related to the devil, but through carefully detailed descriptions and wordplay, Gogol suggests several times that Petrovich is an evil character.

In Slavic folklore, the Devil is believed to live in disagreeable places such as in swamps, dark thickets or near deep lakes and stories attributing the appearance of tobacco and alcohol to the devil were widely disseminated(1). Coincidentally, Gogol describes Petrovich as a drunk who uses rotten language and lives in a cockroach infested house. While Petrovich's lifestyle is clearly far from saintly, it alone hardly suggests that he is the devil. His appearance, on the other hand, offers another clue to his clandestine identity. Petrovich has a pockmarked face, he is missing an eye, and he has a misshapen toenail that is "as thick and strong as the shell of a tortoise".

In folklore, the devil is often depicted as being deformed in some way and the devil's toenail is a thick, curved shell that is believed to be reminiscent of a badly manicured devil's toenail(5). In case it is still questionable that Petrovich is representative of wrongdoing in "The Overcoat", Gogol moves beyond descriptions of Petrovich, and instead, continues the implications of <https://assignbuster.com/analysis-of-gogols-the-overcoat-essay/>

him being the devil while furthering the plot of the story. He does this by artful wordplay.

It is no coincidence that, on many occasions, Petrovich is discreetly referred to as "the devil" in the story. The first time is by his wife, who called Petrovich "the one-eyed devil" after he had one too many drinks. Yet another instance of Gogol's implications that Petrovich is wicked is the faceless general that is depicted on Petrovich's snuff box.

In Christianity, as well as in folk literature, the Devil is often portrayed as being faceless. Gogol, being a connoisseur and collector of religious materials would have been familiar with the folk tradition that the Devil is faceless (2). It is no surprise then that, the idea of the new overcoat, which ultimately drives Akakievich to his death, was originally suggested by Petrovich. In Slavic folk belief, the devil's most outstanding characteristic was his total hostility toward man(1). The devil existed for the sole purpose of inflicting harm and prompting evil deeds(1). Petrovich fans the flame of passion in Akaky Akakievich's soul(2). The overcoat is not just a material possession to Akaky Akakievich. The overcoat was compared by Gogol to a companion for Akaky Akakievich.

It was "as though he had married, as though some other person were present with him". Akaky Akakievich went through extreme measures, such as not eating and not using candles, so that he could save up for the coat. In the story, the overcoat is not an ordinary object, but instead, it is the object of Akaky Akakievich's love. The theme of "The Overcoat" is the kindling of the human soul, its rebirth under the influence of love(2). The overcoat, to

Akaky Akakievich, is viewed as grand, exalted, and important. It appears that Akaky Akakievich views his overcoat how a religious person views God.

Much like many people who have accepted God in to their life do, Akaky Akakievich goes through a drastic personality transformation once he has the coat, but unlike people who have accepted God, his new personality drives him to sin. Akaky Akakievich, who “ no one could say that they had ever seen at an evening party”, accepted an invitation to a work party and participates in drinking. Later in the evening, on his way home, he sees a woman and for some reason which he cannot explain, Akaky Akakievich gets the urge to chase after her. While he rejects his temptation, his drinking and sexual thoughts are novel to Akaky Akakievich, whose bland life before the overcoat was revolutionized. When the overcoat is stolen from Akaky Akakievich, his personality again goes through a radical change. He switches from one extreme to another.

At first, he no longer displayed the confidence that he had when he wore the overcoat. He missed work and moped around as if he had lost his wife or best friend. As time went on though, Akaky Akakievich's mental state was not the only part of him to suffer. His health began to decline at a rapid pace. This sudden illness could again be linked to Slavic folk belief because Peasants often held the devil responsible for a large range of illnesses, either directly or through intermediary sources (1). Akaky Akakievich became feverish and started to have hallucinations. With this illness, Akaky Akakievich became violent and “ uttered the most awful language, so that his old landlady positively crossed herself”.

Eventually, Akaky Akakievich's illness took his life. Ironically, the coat which brought Akaky Akakievich to life is also what ended up killing him. Many religions, including Christianity and Slavic traditions, believe that endowing any object with more power than God is destructive(5). Gogol himself summed up common Slavic belief when he said that it is necessary to have a "immovable anchor"; since all things in the world are doomed to destruction, man must have within him " a center on which he can lean and thereby overcome the very worst sufferings"(2). This " immovable anchor" which Gogol spoke of, of course, was God. Since Akaky Akakievich had no internal connection with God to lean on, but instead, glorified a coat, he would have been viewed as a person whose soul fell into the arms of evil in Slavic folklore. He was brought to life by the devil and idolized material possessions.

His death, which was caused by his preoccupation with the overcoat, would have been viewed as an unnatural death caused by his sins and his encounters with unclean forces. Unnatural deaths in Slavic folklore were those who did not die by their own death", that is, those who died before their time because of some sort of evil (3). These deaths included suicides, the deaths of unbaptized children, and deaths that were caused by contact with an unclean force (3). The bodies of the unnaturally deceased would be rejected by the earth and would therefore not decompose (1).

Instead, these people would return to the external world to pursue their obsessions as malevolent demonic beings known as the " unclean dead" (1). By returning from the other world to the cold streets of St. Petersburg, Akaky Akakievich shows that he has not found peace beyond the grave, that he is

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still bound, heart and soul, to his earthly love(2). The illusory victory of earthly love over death though, is really the victory of the evil spirit over man's soul (2). The ending to Gogol's story aligns itself perfectly with these Slavic folk traditions.

Akaky Akakievich, who died because of unnatural causes, came back as a corpse to steal the overcoats of the people who walked the streets of St. Petersburg. While the word "corpse" might sound more unusual than using the word "ghost" to describe the malicious coat-stealing creature, Gogol probably chose this word to corpse, a dead body that has not decomposed, the further fit the mold of folk traditions. "The Overcoat" is strongly conditioned by Slavic folk beliefs. Gogol incorporates beliefs regarding the devil's powers, the importance of a relationship with God and the dangers of materialistic adoration into a powerful piece where a man's soul is unable to defeat the hands of evil.