

# Analysis of a key passage

Business



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The Government Inspector<sup>1</sup>, by Nikolai Gogol, is a satirical play about Russian society during the nineteenth century. The play is about corrupt and self-seeking officials of a town in Tsarist Russia mistaking a poor commoner from Moscow for a government inspector. The passage taken for analysis from Act One, Scene One (attached) is central to the development of the whole play, for it is in this part of the play that the main dramatic action – the deception between the government officials, represented by the Governor, and Khlestakov – begins. In the passage, Gogol reveals the unwitting act of deception and profound social problems and thus brings into focus the main theme of the play – widespread corruption in Russian society. The passage offers important insight into the mentalities of the main characters: the Governor and Khlestakov, in particular how guilt plays a large role in shaping their actions.

Gogol also uses dramatic irony and verbal and physical humor, which are typical of the play, to enhance the effectiveness of his satire in this passage. The essential dramatic element of the play, the unwitting deception between Khlestakov and the Governor, begins in this passage. The Governor believes that Khlestakov is the rumored Inspector from Moscow, while Khlestakov believes that the Governor is going to arrest him because he has not paid his rent (lines 67-75) <sup>2</sup>. On the surface, the reason for this absurd and comical deception seems to stem from misfortune and accident, but a closer analysis of the passage reveals deeper social conditions of Tsarist Russia under which the deception takes place. The passage focuses on the theme of corruption as the most important cause of the deception. In the passage, the Governor

confesses that he has “ accepted the odd bribe” and “ had the sergeant’s widow flogged” (lines 122-125).

The entire town is mismanaged and “ the streets are full of ice and rubbish and beggars” (p. 11). The destitute state of the town shows that the Governor has no sense of responsibility and is not at all concerned with the welfare of people. However, corruption is not only confined to the Governor. Other officials are also corrupt. For example, the Doctor believes in “ natural cures” (if a man is going to die, he dies), the Judge regularly accepts bribes, and the Postmaster opens every letter that comes into the post office. Although the direct object of satire in the play is the particular group of officials, their attitudes and behavior are representative of officials in Tsarist Russia.

Gogol’s portrayal of them shows that it is almost inevitable that they will be deceived. Guilty of corruption, they fearfully leap to the belief that they will be exposed, as the Governor does in this passage. The Governor’s sense of guilt plays a major role in creating the situation of mutual deception in the passage. The Governor is fully aware of his corruption. This knowledge blinds him, disables his sense of judgment, and deepens his error.

He is so afraid of being exposed that he does not even attempt to check Khlestakov’s identity. Instead he is completely preoccupied with how he may make a good impression on the Inspector and mislead him into believing that he has managed the town well. In fact, the Governor is so consumed with guilt and fear that, in an act of self preservation, he is almost compelled to confess his corruption: “ If I have accepted the odd bribe, it was only an

innocent little one” (line 122). The reader is reminded here that earlier in the play, when the Governor finds out that the assumed Inspector is only in his twenties, he responds, “ So much the better. Young men are easier to manipulate. The older they get, the tougher” (p.

11). Thus, Gogol concludes that the Governor’s misidentification of Khlestakov as the Inspector can be most adequately attributed to his guilt. A characteristic feature of the Governor is his hypocrisy. In this passage, the Governor’s character is vividly revealed in his asides. Although Gogol uses asides elsewhere in the play, they are much more frequently used in this passage.

In addition to producing a comic effect on the audience, they expose the Governor’s two-sidedness: what he thinks is completely different from what he says. He calls Khlestakov a “ scrawny sneaky-looking chap”, in one of his asides and says: “ I could crack him [Khlestakov] like a flea” (line 210), but treats Khlestakov with utmost respect in front of him. Hypocrisy is also embodied in other government officials. Later in the play they lie to Khlestakov about how well they have performed their duties, while in reality what they have done is the exact opposite. Due to their moral degeneration, hypocrisy has become a necessary and habitual form of self-protection for the Governor and the officials. Gogol’s introduction of mutual deception contributes to the dramatic tension in the passage.

Like the Governor, Khlestakov is filled with guilt and fear – he has not paid his rent. The passage describes how a fearful Khlestakov is transformed into a confident “ Inspector”. The change in Khlestakov’s tone and diction

matches the change in his state of mind. When Khlestakov first meets the Governor, he is nervous and self-defensive; he stammers and stutters: “ I’ll... I’m employed by the government in Petersburg. I, I, I...” (lines 101-102). However, as the dialogue progresses, and when he realizes that the Governor takes him for someone else, he becomes self-assured and takes on an air of importance.

Many of Khlestakov’s speeches in this passage reveal his character. Although an ordinary person, he enjoys indulging in grandiose fantasies of greatness and importance; although impecunious, he gives pompous instructions: “ Ridiculous! I’ll cancel my order! Go and tell him I need three courses at least! Four!” (lines 13-14) Khlestakov’s personality plays a role in the creation of the deception. However, more importantly, as Gogol shows in the passage, it is the corrupt Russian government system that makes it possible for Khlestakov to carry out the deception. Dramatic irony is a central component of the passage and the play as a whole. The misunderstanding between Khlestakov and the Governor constitutes the basis of the dramatic irony in the passage. For example, Khlestakov, who does not hear the Governor’s asides, tells him: I hate hypocrites.

You’re a straightforward chap and a warm host, and I like you for it. I don’t ask much from people, I don’t expect much, frankly, but there are two things I like to see in a man – understanding and consideration for others. (lines 252-256) This is especially ironic when contrasted with the asides of the Governor, in which his hypocrisy and corruption are revealed. While the audience clearly sees the deception of Khlestakov, the Governor and the

town officials do not realize that they are being cheated until the very end. Gogol uses stage directions and dialogue to enhance the dramatic irony. Stage directions like “ Both men are scared stiff.

They stare at each other in silence, without moving” (line 77) underline and reinforce the confusion in the town, which is created by the rumor of the arrival of an “ incognito” government inspector. Abundant humor, both verbal and physical, is an important constituent of the stylistic richness of this passage. Due to Khlestakov’s failure to pay the bill, the waiter gives Khlestakov a soup in which he finds “ a little yellow beak”, “ and some newspaper” (lines 46-47). He then tries to read it: “ Cotton yarn, jute yarn, alpaca, mohair and woollen flannel were in demand, but...

” (lines 47-49). Although very comical, these lines also serve the purpose of satirizing the destitute and deplorable conditions of the town and the irresponsible attitudes of the town officials. Verbal humor is present throughout the play, for example, the comical dialogues in the passage between Dobchinsky and Bobchinsky, in which each interrupts and completes the sentences of the other. In addition to verbal humor, the passage also contains physical humor. We see the physical humor of Bobchinsky “ peeping around the door” (line 89), “ peeping through the skylight” (lines 167 and 272), and “ falling through the skylight and clinging on to the chandelier, which gradually sags down on to the bed, which finally collapses” (lines 306-309).

Gogol often uses such humor throughout the play, for example, the flashes of lightening and the freeze frame of the final tableau. The physical humor

used in the play enhances the slapstick qualities and emphasizes the ridiculousness and stupidity of the officials and townspeople. The passage chosen for analysis is, then, a pivotal moment in the development of the dramatic plot of *The Government Inspector*. In the passage Gogol not only brings out the major theme of the play, but also sets up the situation in which dramatic irony starts to advance the plot. Gogol's characterization of the Governor and Khlestakov and his use of dramatic irony and satirical comedy in the passage are crucial for our understanding of the whole play. 1 Gogol, *The Government Inspector*, (London: Methuen, 1985).

2 All further references to the passage will be given in brackets as line numbers. References outside the passage will be given as page numbers.