Readings in Russian Literature – The Nineteenth Century

Spring 2023, IIIT Hyderabad
Assignment 1

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N.B. The page numbers in the citations are drawn from *The Collected Tales of Nikolai Gogol*, translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (1999).

Introduction

Gogol's short story *The Overcoat*, as noted by Pevear, takes the reader through a bewildering variety of circumstances. It describes the human condition in so many different situations (defined by rank, profession, and gender), that it is hard to pick out a central theme. The diversity of characters, and their continual encounters with the Table of Ranks and its fictions (the "obligatory view" of these stories that Pevear criticises) disguises other aspects of the story to an extent that its "true" message can be argued to be any one of a number of things.

In this essay, I argue that a strong interpretation of the story is as a commentary on the lack of individuality of people, in terms of class, profession, and nationality.
Another interpretation, in some ways encompassing the first, is to read *The Overcoat* as a satire on the focus given by society to superficialities. It encompasses the lack of individuality in the sense that the broad categories people are lumped into (by virtue of class, profession, or nationality) tend to define their personality more than anything else, and so these superficialities dominate over any human-oriented view one can take of a person.

We will first examine evidence that Gogol intended a lack of individuality, and then move on to the superficiality aspect. We then consider what about Gogol's world might have pushed him to highlight these aspects in this way.

Lack of Individuality

Many instances, scattered throughout the course of the story, point towards Gogol very purposefully avoiding specificity as much as possible. A lack of detail, both implicit and explicit, is apparent in many contexts, some of which we examine here.

More precisely, we consider the names of various characters, the setting of the story, and the generalisations made by the narrator throughout, and the conditions of Akaky's work.
The first and last ideas listed above are implicit trends towards the generality we posit, while the other two are very explicitly pointed out by the narrator at various points.

Names

One subtle push that Gogol gives this story towards a lack of individuality is the remarkable paucity of last names. Only three last names are ever mentioned throughout the story – Akaky Akakievich's (Bashmachkin), and his godparents' (Ivan Ivanovich Yeroshkin and Arina Semyonovna Belobriushkova). The latter two are never referred to again, and Akaky's last name is never mentioned after his introduction.
Furthermore, in explaining that the origin of the name *Bashmachkin* is *bashmak*, or "shoe", the author takes away from it what little individuality it has – even Akaky's family name is merely a common word, which does not even have any relation to his boot-wearing forebears. He was not even lucky enough to be given a name of his own at birth, being named after his father as a last resort.

The other main characters' last names are not even mentioned. The tailor is once "Grigory", but always "Petrovich" afterwards. The *important personage* is either "Ivan Abramovich" or "Stepan Varlamovich" (which of these two is not even made clear), neither of which make mention of a last name.

Other, more minor, characters, like Petrovich's wife, Akaky's mother, and the clerk who pities Akaky, are not named at all.

These omissions (and judicious mentions), although implicit, consistently add to the vagueness of the story as it progresses.

Setting

The first paragraph of the story sets the background for it – with very explicit and unequivocal vagueness. The very first line states

> In the department of … but it would be better not to say in which department. [p. 219]

and later in the paragraph there follows Akaky Akakievich's introduction

> … there served a certain clerk; a not very remarkable clerk, one might say… [p. 219]

The location of the party thrown by a clerk for Akaky's new overcoat is also not revealed:

> Precisely where the clerk who had invited him lived, we unfortunately cannot say … whatever there is in Petersburg, all those houses and streets, has so mixed and merged together in our head … [p. 227]

The introduction of the last main character in the story, the person to whom Akaky reports the theft, is in a similar vein:

> … and the best thing would be to address a certain *important person* … [p. 230]

and as noted above, he is never referred to but by the epithet "the *important person*".

Thus, the author takes pains to avoid mentioning any detail whatsoever about the time and place that the story occurs in. No location is mentioned with any specificity, and the introductions of the characters and places are concealed from the reader. The resulting impression is that the events given in the story could be happening anywhere in St. Petersburg, at any point, and involving any people.

Generalisations

The narrator generalises across rank, profession, and nationality at several points, very explicitly. The very third sentence (immediately following a rant on "all this officialdom") tells us that

> Nowadays every private individual considers the whole of society insulted in his person. [p. 219]

making a statement about the touchiness of all individuals with any rank at all (and echoing the sentiments voiced in *The Nose*).

Later, the narrator describes the evening engagements of clerks of Akaky's position, in stunning detail but at the same time implying that it is the same thing all of them are doing:

> … in short, even at that time when all clerks disperse … gossip blown over from high society [p. 221]

Here and elsewhere we find general statements about all Russians:

> [Gossip blown over from high society is] something a Russian man can never give up under any circumstances [p. 221]

and other nations are not exempt from stereotypes either:

> "It's Germans invented them so as to earn more money for themselves." [p. 223]
>
> "Well, these Frenchmen! what can you say, if they want something sort of …" [p. 227]

In the description of Petrovich the tailor's house, we find another blanket statement, this time about houses in St. Petersburg:

> … that spiritous smell that makes the eyes smart and is inevitably present in all back stairways of Petersburg houses … [p. 222]

The recurrence of statements of this nature throughout the story serve to create an impression that all characters are behaving in exactly the same way that someone else of the same profession, or nationality, or rank, would in that position. This strengthens the idea that this story could have happened, as we have noted, to anyone, anywhere, at any time at all.

Akaky's Profession

Two specific observations with regard to Akaky's professional situation bring themselves to notice in the context of a lack of individuality.

First, Akaky's very occupation (his entire world, in fact) is *copying* – the least original task possible. His whole life revolves around writing letters again that someone else has written before him – the most mundane, uninventive task in existence. Furthermore, he proves himself incapable of even the smallest modification to this task – he is employed as, and cannot rise beyond, a photocopier, which contributes to the general idea of a lack of individuality.

Secondly, towards the end of the story, Akaky's death is not even noticed by his co-workers. When he fails to turn up at the office for a few days, and enquiries are instituted, only then is it known that he has passed – and he is replaced within a day of this being known. We have noted Gogol's tendency (in *The Nose*) to leave plot threads hanging when they contribute no more to the story – given this, there must surely be a good reason for him to have mentioned that Akaky was replaced (because the office features no more in the story after this point). This reason, I hypothesise, was to emphasise how replaceable – one might even say nonessential – Akaky was to the occupation to which he devoted his whole being. While the irony is plain here, what I hope to highlight by this observation is the push that it gives to the generality of the protagonist.

Superficiality

Orthogonally, many aspects of the story point towards a superficiality. This superficiality manifests in several ways, not least the attitudes of the characters towards religion, foreigners, and social position.

That the title of the story – and one of the recurrent objects in it – should be an overcoat is fitting to this interpretation. The new, fancy overcoat represents a cover – a façade – beneath which Akaky's unremarkability (?) is hidden, which incongruity is the cause of his eventual death.

Religion

Religion crops up in the background of the story a couple of times, but never in a context relating to piety.

The first time it appears is when Akaky's mother is deciding what to name him – she is given options from the names of various saints, all of which turn out to be decidedly unsatisfactory. However, this is ironic – the idea being to name a person after the saint on whose day they were born, it is patently ridiculous to open the calendar to a random place and pick a saint's name from that day (which is what happened, multiple times). The blind, self-defeating manner in which this custom is followed is impossible to ignore. Moreover, the actions and thoughts of Akaky himself paint him as more devout than anyone else (in the story, at least):

> smiling beforehand at the thought of the next day: What would God send him to copy tomorrow? [p. 221]

> … he even nearly made a mistake, so that he cried "Oh!" almost aloud and crossed himself. [p. 225]

which lends a further irony to the fact that he could not be named after a saint.

Later in the story, we see in Petrovich's history that he

> … started drinking rather heavily on feast days—first on great feasts, and then on all church feasts indiscriminately, wherever a little cross appeared on the calendar. [p. 222]

which makes him "true to the customs of his forebears". Gogol may have intended to point out here that at the time, and for many generations past, feast days were no more than an excuse to get drunk for serfs or freedmen.

These passing mentions of religious aspects in the text only go to highlight that the most superficial, ritualistic aspects of it continue to affect people's lives – faith and devotion are mere words to the average person, in Gogol's imagination at least.

Attitude towards Foreigners

We have seen the stereotypes cast by Petrovich and Akaky himself on foreigners, which are explicitly or implicitly derisive, to some extent. Petrovich, at any rate, does not trouble to hide his disdain for Germans, while Akaky's thoughts go in a more subtle, indulgent vein.

However, the *important person* so frequently referred to is clearly enamoured of Western European nations – his daughter addresses him in French ("*Bonjour, papa!*" [p. 234]) and the narrator harps on his (apparently anomalous) close friendship with a lady of German origin, Karolina Ivanovna, to no little degree.

We note, then, that while those who consider themselves "high-ranking" or "important" preserve some respect for these nations, but what might be called the middle class does not. But the important person who so reveres the foreigners was, by the narrator's admission, once an "unimportant person" (p. 230) – and so presumably held similarly pejorative views of these same foreigners. His present deference is no more than a mask that his rank put on him – which brings us to the next argument.

Social Position

Fictions like "dignity" or "manners", as the narrator and some characters note, are simply that – fictions. They reflect no distinction in the personality of those who hold them, nor any excellence that they have achieved. The first instance of this being remarked explicitly in this story is

> … how much savage coarseness is concealed in refined, cultivated manners, and God! even in a man the world regards as noble and honorable … [p. 220]

The sudden change in the *important person* due to his promotion is another instance of Gogol bringing notice to this idea.

> When he happened to be with his equals, … incomparably better [p. 230]

and the fact that this was no more than a superficial alteration to his behaviour is further emphasised by his improvement after Akaky's death:

> He even began to say "How dare you, do you realize who is before you?" far less often to his subordinates; and if he did say it, it was not without first listening to what the matter was. [p. 235]

Another argument for the superficiality of the Table of Ranks can be made from the Gogol's original choice of words, which was lost in translation. The *important person*, in the original, is a *znachitel'noye litso* – *litso* meaning, literally, "face". What matters for his importance (or lack thereof, as the case may be) is the exterior, the appearances, and not the person themself.

Conclusions

While the above arguments may establish that major themes of this story are a lack of individuality and a general superficiality, we have not seen why this should be the case. What is it about these themes that made this story relevant?

One possibility (given the repeated references to the more "progressed" nations of Germany and France) is that Gogol was commenting on the move towards mass production that the Industrial Revolution started. A factor behind this guess is that this story was first published in 1842, soon after the two "great" rulers' attempts to modernise Russia, and so Gogol may have intended to satirise the impersonality that technological advances were bringing into manufacturing. Another significant event that preceded the publication of this work was Pyotr Chaadayev's comment that Russia had "contributed nothing to the progress of the human spirit" and "never taken the trouble to invent anything [themselves]" (quoted in Bartlett 1992). Thus the individuality that Gogol paints as lacking throughout his story may be satirising Russia's aping of Western European nations at this time in its history.
Akaky's unfortunate death, sparked off by his uncharacteristic desire for a new overcoat (uncharacteristic because we saw earlier that he was incapable even of changing the addressee of a letter), might be a subtle dig at this move of the great monarchs, prophesying that it will end in disaster.

This ties into the idea of superficiality – everything that Russia does is an imitation, a parroting, of other peoples. Beneath the elaborate customs and the fancy words, there lies nothing in Russia other than poor, unremarkable men like Akaky Akakievich.

> Thus everything in holy Russia is infected with imitation, and each one mimics and apes his superior. [p. 230]

References

1. Bartlett, Rosamund. "Russian Culture: 1801-1917." [p. 92]