

NIKOLAI GOGOL

“We all come from Gogol’s ‘Overcoat.’” ~Fyodor Dostoevsky



During his short life, Nikolai Gogol established himself as one of the finest and most influential *Russian* writers of the nineteenth century, creating works characterized by a unique blend of Romanticism, Realism, and comedy. The son of a small landowner, Gogol was born in the Ukraine. As a teenager, he suffered from feelings of isolation and discontent and turned to writing as a means of

expressing these emotions. After graduating from high school in 1828, he moved to St. Petersburg (Leningrad in the former Soviet Union), hoping to forge an exciting and fulfilling life. He lived there for eight years, working mostly as a minor civil servant and a private tutor, and also briefly serving as a history professor at the University of St. Petersburg. At the same time, he established himself as a successful writer, publishing his first collection of short stories, *Evenings on a Farm Near Kikanka*, in 1832. In these stories Gogol paints a vivid, detailed portrait of Ukrainian life, into which he introduces elements of the supernatural, such as water nymphs, witches, and magicians.

In his second and third collections of stories *Mirgorod* (1835) and *Arabesques* (1835), Gogol continued to blend realism with fantasy, while adding touches of humor. His sense of humor came to the forefront in his first play, *The Inspector General* (1836), a satirical comedy that pokes fun at the Russian government. Gogol’s depiction of Russian bureaucrats as being gullible and dishonest created a controversy that prompted Gogol to leave Russia and settle in Rome.

While living in Rome, Gogol began devoting all his energy to writing *Dead Souls* (1842), his longest and most ambitious work. When this novel was published, it was immediately lauded as Gogol’s masterpiece. Unlike earlier Russian novels, *Dead Souls* depicts everyday Russian life without flattery and without exaggeration. As a result, it is generally regarded as the first Russian Realistic novel.

In 1842 Gogol also published his most famous short story, “The Overcoat.” In the remaining years of his life, however, he

produced very little. Feeling that he had a serious moral lesson to teach, Gogol was deeply disturbed by the fact that many people thought of him as a storyteller and a humorist. While suffering from constant psychological turmoil and frequent bouts of physical illness, he worked on a second volume of *Dead Souls*, in which he hoped to convey a more positive message. But after ten years of unrewarding work on this project, he directed his servant to put the unfinished manuscript into an oven and burn it. Ten days later he died.

It is unfortunate that Gogol was dissatisfied with his work and his reputation when he died. In the years since his death, he has come to be recognized that only for his storytelling ability and his use of humor, but also for his awareness of life’s ironies and injustices and his understanding of human nature. In addition, because of his grimly accurate portrayal of nineteenth-century Russian life, he has come to be regarded as the founder of Russian Realism, although many of his works contain elements of the supernatural.

More About the Author

Early in his life, Nikolai Gogol wrote a friend, “I swear I shall achieve something beyond the capacities of ordinary men. “He made good on his promise; but he encountered a host of problems along the way. Physically ugly, with a hollow chest and a long, drooping nose, he was dubbed “the mysterious dwarf” by his classmates in school. He failed badly as a professor of history. Throughout his life he seldom told the truth to anyone—except in his fiction. In addition, he was a sickly hypochondriac whose inability to support himself forced him to live off his family and friends.

The critic Richard Peace wrote, “Gogol’s contemporaries and later biographers largely agree on one fact: the enigma of his personality. Enigma, too, inheres in his writing, so that both his life and works have given rise to many misunderstandings and have been the subject of widely divergent interpretations. Gogol himself frequently complained of being misunderstood, but, by and large, his attempts at elucidation have merely deepened the mystery.

Peace also noted that “Gogol exerted an immense influence on the whole course of Russian literature and continues to do so to the present day...to call Gogol the father of Russian prose fiction is eminently justifiable.”

Critical Reading Assignment: Conduct a close reading of “The Overcoat” by completing the steps below.

1. Read the story 1 **section** or **chunk** at a time. (at the end of each paragraph or at the end of each page will do)
2. Highlight & define key **terms** you do not know—especially those that occur repeatedly in the story.
3. In the left margin, **summarize** what is happening in each section or chunk. Try to do this in 10 words or less, paying careful attention to important details regarding the following **short story elements**: setting, characterization, conflict, point of view, and narrative structure/sequencing of events.
4. In the right margin, **dig deeper**.
 - Note what the passage is doing. Use power verbs to identify functions: comparing, contrasting, illustrating, describing, arguing, exemplifying, criticizing, etc.
 - Ask questions about the author’s choices, characters’ actions, or about points that you find confusing. Attempt to answer these questions by referring to other parts of the story.
5. After you read: prepare responses to the fishbowl discussion questions (see back)

“The Overcoat” Fishbowl Discussion

After you read Gogol’s story, prepare answers to the following discussion questions. Be sure to refer to a specific passage in each answer.

1 There are 2 overcoats in Gogol’s story, and both are important symbols. What ideas does each overcoat represent or symbolize?

Passage: _____
A1: _____

2 “The Overcoat” is filled with social commentary. What flaws in human nature and/or society does Gogol expose? How does he expose these flaws?

Passage: _____
A2: _____

3 Why does Gogol include the second ghost at the end of the story? Who is he supposed to be?

Passage: _____
A3: _____

4 What does Gogol’s tale convey about an individual’s identity (about where it comes from or what defines it)?

Passage: _____
A4: _____

5 Based on Gogol’s short story, how can we answer the following question: Is it necessary to work within our society’s norms? From what do people gain a sense of value or self-worth?

Passage: _____
A5: _____