

The Real and the Grotesque: Bureaucracy, Alienation, and the Human Condition in Gogol's "The Overcoat" within the Context of Russian Realism

Mishail Sharma
University of Delhi

Abstract

Russian Realism began in the nineteenth century as a reaction against Romanticism and Sentimentalism. Instead of focusing on fantasy and abstraction, it aimed to show the real social and psychological experiences of everyday life. This movement stressed that literature has moral and social duties, and writers became seen as interpreters of humanity and democracy. Nikolai Gogol was a key figure in this tradition, combining Realism, satire, and Gothic elements. His short story "The Overcoat" (1842) is a clear example of Realism's interest in bureaucracy, alienation, and the loss of human spirit. By telling the story of Akaky Akakievich, a low-level clerk, Gogol reveals how Russian bureaucracy can turn people into mere cogs in a machine. The story's use of satire and the supernatural points out the absurdity and cruelty of social hierarchies, turning an ordinary life into a reflection on identity and meaning. Gogol's mix of the grotesque and the real paved the way for later psychological and existential literature, showing that the fantastic can make social truths even more powerful. "The Overcoat" is both a social critique and a look at the struggles of the common man in modern society, where bureaucracy strips life of meaning and only in death or as a ghost does the individual regain some control.

Keywords: Realism, Satire, Bureaucracy, Nineteenth Century, Gogol.

Introduction

During the nineteenth century, Russian literature underwent a significant transformation, shifting away from the idealism of Romanticism and the sentimentality of earlier works. Authors increasingly addressed real social issues, leading to the emergence of Russian Realism. This movement sought to depict life authentically, highlighting injustices, psychological struggles, and moral challenges. It is called Realism. For Russian writers, realism represented not only a literary style but also a moral and philosophical commitment. They maintained that literature should expose societal problems and provide moral and social guidance to readers.

Nikolai Gogol occupied a distinctive and influential position in this literary transformation. Although frequently regarded as a pioneer of Russian Realism, his work resists straightforward classification. Gogol's narratives blend realistic details with the bizarre, merging depictions of everyday life with elements of the fantastic. In works such as "The Nose" (1836) and "The Overcoat" (1842), he exposes the absurdity and isolation inherent in bureaucratic existence while employing fantasy and the supernatural to probe questions of identity, morality, and human dignity. This combination enabled Gogol to produce stories that were simultaneously critical of society and reflective on profound existential issues.

In “The Overcoat” (1842), Gogol presents the narrative of Akaky Akakyeveich Bashmachkin, a modest clerk in St. Petersburg whose existence revolves around monotonous office tasks. Upon acquiring a new overcoat, symbolizing warmth, dignity, and social acceptance, Akaky soon has it stolen. This event precipitates his despair, subsequent death, and eventual return as a ghost seeking retribution. The story functions as a powerful symbol of social invisibility, oppressive bureaucracy, and the erosion of personal identity within a mechanized society. Gogol’s narrative simultaneously satirizes bureaucratic absurdity and evokes empathy for the “little man,” a motif that influenced this paper.

This paper contends that “The Overcoat” (1842) occupies a central position within Russian Realism by linking social criticism to complex psychological and spiritual themes. Through the integration of realism with elements of the strange and fantastic, Gogol demonstrates how bureaucratic systems can render individuals insignificant, while also suggesting that imagination and empathy offer potential avenues for overcoming such adversity. The following analysis will explore how Gogol’s employment of both realism and surrealism illuminates the multifaceted nature of suffering in modern life, encompassing both external and internal dimensions. The narrative represents how people suffer in modern life, both on the outside and within.

Historical Context of Russian Realism

Russian Realism emerged in the nineteenth century, representing a significant transformation in Russian literature. Originating in the 1830s and becoming dominant by the 1860s, it arose in response to Romanticism and Sentimentalism, which had previously influenced Russian writing. The Romantic emphasis on the exotic, the sublime, and personal emotion increasingly appeared disconnected from the pressing social changes in Russia. As industrialization, serfdom, bureaucracy, and political repression intensified social inequality and alienation, Realism became both a moral and artistic imperative. Literature was now expected to depict reality rather than merely idealize it.

The critic Pavel Annenkov popularized the term “Realism” in Russian literary criticism through an unsigned essay published in 1849 in *The Contemporary*. By the mid-nineteenth century, the term had become widely used. However, the movement’s foundational ideas predated this terminology. In the 1830s, Nikolai Nadezhdin advocated for art to focus on “reality” rather than the artificiality of Romanticism. His student, Vissarion Belinsky, played a particularly influential role in shaping Russian Realism. Belinsky promoted the Natural School, urging writers to portray the lives of ordinary people and to use literature to advance social change. For Belinsky, art was not solely concerned with beauty but constituted a moral endeavor to support “Humanity” and “Democracy.” (Belinsky 3)

The conviction that literature possesses a social function became the foundation of Russian Realism. While Western European Realism, exemplified by writers such as Balzac, Flaubert, and Dickens, often examined the psychological and material conditions of the middle class, Russian Realism placed greater emphasis on ethical and political concerns. Authors including Turgenev, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy regarded the novel as a medium for national self-reflection, exposing both the strengths and shortcomings of Russian society. According to

Belinsky, the writer was not merely a storyteller but a “moral legislator” (2), responsible for fostering social awareness through art. Writers were expected to represent social reality with accuracy and to interpret its underlying significance, revealing the deeper truths beneath everyday existence. The strength of Realism resided in its capacity to depict both external circumstances and the internal consciousness of individuals shaped by social forces. In this sense, Russian Realism may be understood as a form of moral phenomenology: a pursuit of truth through the depiction of lived experience.

Russian Realism was not a monolithic movement; it developed alongside various artistic and ideological currents. Some authors, such as Goncharov and Turgenev, adopted a moderate, observational approach, whereas others, including Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, incorporated philosophical, psychological, and spiritual dimensions into their works. Preceding these writers, Gogol emerged as a distinctive and influential figure. His early stories, including “The Nose” (1836), “The Overcoat” (1842), and “The Government Inspector” (1836), combined satire with profound, often tragic themes. Through exaggeration and surreal imagery, Gogol exposed the absurdity of bureaucracy and examined the emptiness at its core.

Gogol’s version of realism differed significantly from Western notions of “pure” Realism. His narratives exemplify what Mikhail Bakhtin later termed the “carnavalesque,” blending comedy with tragedy and juxtaposing the sacred with the ordinary. Gogol’s depictions of petty clerks, corrupt officials, and unsettling urban environments illustrate a society in moral disarray. Despite their strangeness, these stories convey a distinct social truth. Gogol’s writing compels readers to confront the moral void of Russian bureaucracy and the fragility of personal identity within that context. In the nineteenth century, Gogol’s impact was firmly established in Russian literature. Dostoevsky famously said, “We have all come out of Gogol’s *‘The Overcoat’*,” showing how Gogol’s idea of the “little man” influenced many Russian writers. This character—the humble, isolated person ignored by society—became a key element of Russian Realism’s portrayal of the human experience. Through Akaky Akakievich, Gogol established a tradition of giving voice to the overlooked and oppressed, turning the sadness of bureaucracy into a lesson in morality.

As Russian Realism evolved, it transcended the boundaries of literary style to become a means of investigating truth, morality, and human dignity. Writers regarded the depiction of real life as a vital task capable of fostering social change by cultivating empathy and ethical awareness. Within this context, Gogol’s “The Overcoat” (1842) serves as a bridge between the satirical realism of the 1830s and the subsequent psychological and existential realism. The work integrates social critique with profound spiritual significance, demonstrating that the grotesque can function as a powerful element within realism rather than as its antithesis.

Representation of the Bureaucratic World in “The Overcoat”

In “The Overcoat” (1842), bureaucracy functions as more than a social institution; it serves as the central structure and symbol within Gogol’s narrative world. The nineteenth-century Russian civil service operated as a complex hierarchy, meticulously organized by Peter the Great’s Table of Ranks (1722). Individuals were valued according to their rank rather than their intrinsic humanity. Gogol transforms this administrative system into a moral allegory,

illustrating how rigid social order can result in dehumanization. The protagonist, Akaky Akakyevech Bashmachkin, a low-ranking official, embodies the facelessness inherent in the bureaucratic system. He exists without personal identity, ambition, or voice.

Gogol begins the story by meticulously detailing Akaky's daily office routine, his repetitive copying tasks, and the ridicule he endures from coworkers. Through this attention to mundane details, Gogol transforms bureaucracy into an existential condition. As Joseph Frank observes, Gogol's Petersburg is "a city of documents and copies, where human beings become extensions of their paperwork" (223). The emphasis on formality and repetition eliminates spontaneity, rendering life mechanical. Akaky's existence revolves entirely around copying, exemplifying a bureaucratic culture defined by meaningless repetition and unquestioning obedience to authority.

Gogol's portrayal of bureaucratic life anticipates Max Weber's later conception of bureaucracy as an impersonal, rule-based system that prioritizes efficiency over individuality (962). Yet, Gogol's treatment is more prophetic and moral than strictly sociological. In "The Overcoat" (1842), bureaucracy symbolizes spiritual death, severing individuals from their authentic selves. Akaky's superiors exemplify this abuse of power; they are depicted as cold, self-important, and more concerned with status than with justice. The "Very Important Person," whose arrogance extinguishes Akaky's final hope for assistance, embodies the bureaucratic ideal of authority devoid of empathy.

The victim of this bureaucracy is the "little man". The concept of the "little man" (malyi chelovek) holds significant importance in Russian Realism, with Gogol's Akaky Akakyevech serving as one of its earliest and most compelling examples. In a society preoccupied with rank and privilege, the "little man" is marginalized and rendered insignificant by the state. Fyodor Dostoevsky's assertion, "We have all come out from under Gogol's 'Overcoat,'" acknowledges not only Gogol's stylistic influence but also his commitment to depicting the inner lives of those deemed unimportant.

Akaky's invisibility to those around him mirrors his own lack of self-awareness. Although his coworkers ridicule him, he never asserts himself and passively accepts his circumstances. Gogol's narration, characterized by irony and sympathy, exposes society's moral blindness toward individuals like Akaky. In this respect, "The Overcoat" (1842) anticipates later existential literature, where themes of invisibility and alienation are central.

Gogol's artistry lies in transforming Akaky's mundane existence into a profound tragedy. The act of saving for a new overcoat, seemingly a modest aspiration, becomes a symbol of hope. The overcoat represents dignity rather than luxury and serves as Akaky's attempt to assert his humanity within a harsh environment. When the coat is stolen, Akaky's sense of self is obliterated. Within the bureaucratic system, an individual's value is linked to their possessions or titles, so the theft effectively erases Akaky's identity.

A compelling aspect of "The Overcoat" (1842) is Gogol's depiction of the loss of self under bureaucratic domination. The office's regulations dictate Akaky's speech, actions, and desires. He rarely articulates his own thoughts, and his consciousness appears subsumed by the

monotony of copying. The narrative tone, oscillating between mockery and empathy, illustrates Akaky's gradual erosion of selfhood.

Gogol's portrayal of Akaky's joy upon acquiring the new coat underscores the pathos of a man whose emotional life is restricted to material possessions. The coat substitutes for his identity and replaces genuine human connection. As Robert Maguire observes, "Akaky's overcoat functions as both object and symbol—his attempt to reconstitute meaning in a world that has deprived him of all inner life" (Maguire 148). The theft of the coat annihilates Akaky's individuality, exposing the profound emptiness within.

The bureaucracy depicted in the story is structured around a rigid hierarchy. Lower-level clerks such as Akaky are routinely humiliated, while higher officials perform a distorted form of nobility. The "Very Important Person," who rebukes Akaky for seeking assistance, exemplifies the arrogance of power unaccompanied by responsibility. Gogol's satirical treatment anticipates Franz Kafka's later works, including *The Trial* (1925) and *The Castle* (1926), in which impersonal authority generates absurdity and despair.

Along with satirical elements, Gogol uses humor in his story, while also showing the tragic absurdity of life in a bureaucracy. The office, full of endless paperwork and minor rivalries, becomes a place where human dignity is slowly destroyed. Still, Gogol's humor is mixed with compassion. The narrator makes fun of Akaky's focus on the overcoat, but also feels sorry for the social conditions that make this obsession unavoidable.

Following Akaky's death, which is met with indifference by his colleagues and the bureaucracy, Gogol transitions from realism to myth and morality. In the story's supernatural conclusion, Akaky's spirit haunts St. Petersburg, stealing coats and inverting the established power structure. The once powerless clerk assumes the role of a judge, exacting retribution against those who wronged him. Although this spectral revenge is fantastical, it introduces a sense of moral equilibrium absent from reality. As Boris Eikhenbaum observes, Gogol's supernatural elements "compensate for the insufficiency of social justice in the real world" (127).

Akaky's ghost terrifies the very officials who previously disregarded him, including the "Very Important Person." However, this act of revenge fails to achieve genuine justice; it merely offers a grim semblance of it. The bureaucratic system that dehumanized Akaky remains unchanged. The haunting ceases, yet the bureaucracy persists. Gogol's ultimate irony is that even in death, the "little man" attains only fleeting significance.

Although Gogol wrote this story in the mid-nineteenth century, his criticism of bureaucracy still feels modern. He predicts the alienation found in today's workplaces, where people are seen as data or numbers. Akaky's repetitive copying reflects current worries about automation and the loss of humanity in office work. In this way, Gogol's Petersburg is a lasting symbol of how modern systems can consume the people who work in them.

The narrative also anticipates modern psychological realism, particularly in its portrayal of Akaky's internal disintegration. His alienation extends beyond the social realm to encompass his very existence; he is estranged from his own desires and leads a life of quiet

nonexistence. The supernatural conclusion underscores this condition, as Akaky becomes a phantom lacking genuine presence or recognition. For contemporary readers, Akaky's spectral revenge may symbolize the worker who, having been erased by the system, returns to confront it on moral grounds.

"The Overcoat" and the Portrayal of the Human Condition

Gogol's "The Overcoat" transcends the narrative of a poor clerk's hardships, functioning as an allegory for the human condition in the modern era. Akaky Akakievich's experiences illustrate how individuals can become alienated when they are regarded solely as functions rather than as unique persons. Notably, Gogol examined the concept of alienation before Marx, yet with comparable moral urgency. Akaky's detachment from his work, colleagues, and personal desires underscores the dehumanizing effects of bureaucracy.

Akaky's occupation consists of endlessly copying documents, without contributing original thought or even comprehending the content. This purposeless labor symbolizes a life governed by routine and devoid of agency. Gogol's deliberate choice of this profession highlights copying as the quintessential act of repetition without meaning. Subsequently, Georg Lukács contended that realism should portray what is typical of human existence in a given period (92; 93; 104). Through Akaky, Gogol presents a modern individual whose identity is subsumed by monotonous routine. Akaky's alienation emerges not as an anomaly, but as the inevitable outcome of a society structured by hierarchy and imitation.

The tragedy of Gogol's narrative is heightened by the pervasive indifference to Akaky's suffering. His colleagues ridicule him, his superiors disregard his needs, and his efforts to seek assistance are futile. This absence of empathy is emblematic of bureaucratic environments. Akaky's sole attempt at self-expression—purchasing a new overcoat—precipitates his downfall. His fleeting happiness upon acquiring the coat is swiftly undermined when it is stolen, and his appeals for help are ignored, revealing that material possessions are valued above personal identity in this society.

Akaky's death exemplifies the bureaucracy's capacity to annihilate individuality. His subsequent return as a ghost embodies the remnants of humanity after its erasure: a spectral presence, neither fully alive nor dead, wandering St. Petersburg as a manifestation of collective guilt.

Gogol's narrative anticipates the philosophical concept of absurdity later explored by writers such as Albert Camus and Franz Kafka. The absurd arises from the human desire for meaning in an indifferent world. Akaky's commitment to his futile labor parallels the endless, meaningless struggle depicted in Camus's "The Myth of Sisyphus" (1942). Gogol articulates this tension by alternating between pity and humor, thereby illustrating the coexistence of tragedy and comedy. On the social level, absurdity emerges from the irrational structure of bureaucracy, where adherence to rules supersedes compassion. On the metaphysical level, it reflects the disjunction between human aspiration and divine justice. Gogol's supernatural conclusion deliberately leaves this tension unresolved. Akaky's haunting of the "Very Important Person" serves as a grotesque parody of justice rather than genuine redemption. The

world remains fundamentally unjust, yet the experience of the absurd becomes revelatory by compelling recognition of humanity's spiritual impoverishment.

Thus, "The Overcoat" (1842) transcends realism to function as an existential allegory. Akaky's suffering compels readers to confront the potential emptiness of life devoid of meaning, yet Gogol tempers this with compassion. His deployment of irony serves a moral function rather than mere amusement. When readers laugh at Akaky, they are implicated in the very indifference the narrative critiques. This uneasy laughter, described by Mikhail Bakhtin as "carnavalesque ambivalence" (200-205), fosters ethical awareness. The story's bizarre and exaggerated features operate as a reflective device, prompting readers to recognize their own apathy within the absurd world Gogol portrays.

Although "The Overcoat" (1842) is inherently tragic, it simultaneously expresses moral and spiritual compassion. Gogol's narrative style, characterized by both directness and irony, reveals his concern for human weakness and vulnerability. While he satirizes Akaky's obsession with his coat, he does so with underlying kindness. In this manner, Gogol redefines the purpose of literature as a vehicle for fostering empathy toward marginalized individuals.

During the 1830s and 1840s, Russian critics such as Vissarion Belinsky advocated for literature's role in advancing society by promoting compassion and truth. "The Overcoat" (1842) unexpectedly fulfills this objective, exposing injustice not through political argument but through tragic irony. The narrative's strength lies in its refusal to cast the poor clerk as a hero or the wealthy official as a villain. Instead, Gogol demonstrates that both are ensnared in a shared spiritual emptiness. Belinsky characterized "The Overcoat" (1842) as a moral document of its era, calling it "a cry of the human soul" (234). However, Gogol's ethical perspective extends beyond social critique. His empathy for Akaky encompasses not only compassion but also a religious dimension. The narrative reflects a Christian interpretation of humanity's fallen nature. Akaky's innocent suffering functions as a form of redemption, and his spectral return signifies the soul's persistent need for acknowledgment. Even in death, he seeks the moral respect denied him in life —the respect he never received.

Gogol's moral vision anticipates Dostoevsky's later emphasis on ethics, wherein compassion serves as the ultimate measure of righteousness. For both authors, the redemption of humanity begins with attention to the most vulnerable and marginalized individuals. The figure of the "little man" is not merely a victim but a bearer of significant moral insight. Increasingly ascetic and mystical beliefs marked Gogol's later years. "The Overcoat" (1842) encapsulates the tension between redemption and despair that characterizes his outlook. The story's supernatural conclusion embodies this tension: Akaky's haunting operates as both a revenge fantasy and a spiritual allegory. The intrusion of the uncanny suggests the reassertion of moral order absent in life. Nevertheless, Gogol's resolution offers no consolation; the ghost's vengeance fails to alter the bureaucratic system, serving only to reveal its moral emptiness.

In this respect, Gogol's narrative anticipates the modern recognition that suffering does not necessarily yield meaning. Akaky's humiliation and death evoke sympathy, yet have no substantive change. The "Very Important Person" experiences fleeting guilt, only to revert to

indifference. Consequently, Gogol's St. Petersburg remains populated by both living and spectral figures, all trapped in a pervasive spiritual coldness.

Nevertheless, by depicting a world devoid of redemption, Gogol discloses a profound moral insight. His satirical approach anticipates future developments, and his employment of the grotesque distinctively conveys truth. Through his portrayal of the absurd, Gogol intimates that moral awareness remains attainable. Ultimately, the reader's empathy constitutes the sole form of redemption within the narrative.

The enduring significance of "The Overcoat" (1842) lies in its continued relevance. Although composed in nineteenth-century Russia, its exploration of alienation, absurdity, and moral indifference retains contemporary importance. In the current era of digital bureaucracy and automation, Gogol's insights appear prescient. Akaky Akakievich, the unassuming copyist, now symbolizes the modern individual overwhelmed by intricate systems.

Authors such as Dostoevsky, Kafka, and Camus have acknowledged Gogol's influence on their work. Dostoevsky's *Poor Folk* (1846) extends Gogol's emphasis on compassion for the "little man," while Kafka's *The Trial* (1925) amplifies the theme of absurd bureaucracy, transforming it into a nightmarish scenario. Both texts evoke Akaky's ghost through characters ensnared in impersonal systems, perpetually seeking recognition. Gogol's realism transcends mere documentation of social realities; it serves as a means of probing the fundamental truths of human existence. By integrating satire, the grotesque, and the fantastic, he illuminates the spiritual dimension of ordinary life. His oeuvre demonstrates that perceiving reality in its entirety requires acknowledging both its ugliness and beauty, its harshness and kindness, and its tenderness.

Ultimately, "The Overcoat" (1842) constitutes a universal exploration of the human experience. It reveals the fragility of dignity, the persistence of compassion, and the coexistence of sorrow and humor in life. Through Akaky's quiet endurance, Gogol uncovers the essence of humanity—a soul yearning for recognition, even within the most unforgiving circumstances.

Conclusion

Nikolai Gogol's "The Overcoat" (1842) stands as a foundational work of Russian realism. Beneath its seemingly simple narrative lies a profound meditation on the moral and spiritual dimensions of human existence. Through the character of Akaky Akakievich, Gogol illustrates the pervasive sense of invisibility and the longing for recognition that many individuals in modern society experience. By centering the narrative on the "little man," Gogol employs social outsiders to examine the erosion of empathy, the alienation of daily life, and the fragile dignity of individuals within an impersonal, mechanized world.

The realism in "The Overcoat" (1842) extends beyond the depiction of social conditions to encompass a profound moral message. Gogol asserts that even minor actions and overlooked individuals possess genuine tragic significance. In his portrayal of Petersburg, bureaucracy functions as both a tangible and symbolic force that erases individuality and obscures ethical boundaries. Gogol's artistry lies in his seamless integration of the mundane

with the fantastic. The ghostly conclusion serves not merely as fantasy or escapism but as a poetic device that exposes the spiritual emptiness of the world. Through the interplay of reality and the supernatural, Gogol constructs a form of realism in which uncanny elements illuminate more profound existential truths.

By highlighting Akaky's obsessive dedication to his work and his fleeting, ill-fated happiness upon acquiring a new overcoat, Gogol exposes the central contradiction of modern existence: the conflict between the search for meaning and the indifference of bureaucratic systems. Gogol's use of humor is not derisive but redemptive, urging readers to recognize the inherent dignity even in the most marginalized individuals. In this way, Gogol's artistry transforms satire into prophecy, laughter into lamentation, and the specific hardships of a humble clerk into a universal moral parable.

Within Russian literature, "The Overcoat" (1842) represents a pivotal moment. Its influence is evident in Dostoevsky's concern for the marginalized, Tolstoy's emphasis on moral questions, Chekhov's understated realism, and Kafka's exploration of existential absurdity. The enduring power of the story lies in its ability to transcend its historical context and resonate with individuals confronting loneliness, bureaucratic oppression, or diminished compassion.

Ultimately, "The Overcoat" (1842) is not merely about Akaky Akakievich; it is about the world that created him—and continues to generate countless Akakys in new forms. Gogol's masterpiece endures because it confronts us with an uncomfortable truth: that the measure of civilization lies in how it treats its smallest, most silent members.

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