The Overcoat

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF NIKOLAI GOGOL

Nikolai Gogol was born in a Ukrainian village in the Russian Empire to parents of the petty gentry. He began writing when he attended university, and afterwards went to St. Petersburg, hoping to achieve success in the literary world. His self-published poetry was universally mocked, but his first book of short stories, *Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka* (1831), was successful. He wrote prolifically and travelled extensively, spending time in Germany and Switzerland, and living for twelve years in Rome. During this time he completed some of his most famous works, including *Dead Souls* (1842) and "The Overcoat" (1842). In his last few years, Gogol experienced ill health and depression. After burning some of his manuscripts, including the second part of *Dead Souls* (which was meant to be a trilogy), Gogol spent nine days in bed, refusing all food, until he died. Nikolai Gogol is now known as one of the foremost writers in the Russian language, one of the key figures in Russian literary realism, and a predecessor of the styles of Surrealism and the grotesque.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Russian Empire in the 19th century was administered by a large, slow, and corrupt government, which was headed by the emperor, or Tsar. Many of the civil servants in the Russian bureaucracy were poorly paid and uneducated. These conditions created a system in which officials exploited their government status by taking bribes, and in which many bureaucrats were unqualified for their jobs. In this stagnant environment, Nikolai Gogol identified Akaky Akakievich, the main character of "The Overcoat," as the kind of insignificant individual who both suffered under the Empire's oppression and was the epitome of bureaucratic small-mindedness.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Gogol wrote other satires of the Russian Empire, including *Dead Souls* and "The Government Inspector," and the absurd aspect of his work was especially apparent in his story "The Nose." Gogol's own writing was influenced by the works of Alexander Pushkin, the famous Russian poet and author of *Eugene Onegin*. "The Overcoat" then powerfully affected the Russian literature that followed it, so much so that Fyodor Dostoevsky (author of *The Brothers Karamazov* and *Crime and Punishment*) said, "We all come out of Gogol's 'Overcoat'." The elements of the grotesque, the surreal, and the absurd in Gogol's work were especially ahead of their time, and are still influential even to contemporary writers. Those particularly influenced by Gogol include Fyodor Dostoevsky, Anton Chekhov, and Vladimir Nabokov.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Overcoat
- **When Published:** 1842
- **Literary Period:** Realism, 19th Century Russian Literature
- **Genre:** Short Story, Satire
- **Setting:** St. Petersburg, Russia
- **Climax:** Akaky Akakievich's new overcoat is stolen.
- **Point of View:** Third-person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Gogol the incompetent. The University of St. Petersburg hired Gogol as a professor of medieval history in 1834. Having no real knowledge of medieval history, Gogol delivered incomprehensible lectures and pretended that he had a toothache during the final examination, sitting in silence as another professor questioned his students. Gogol resigned from the professorship in 1835.

Gogol after death. Gogol was originally buried at the Danilov Monastery in Moscow, but in 1931, authorities had Gogol's remains transferred from the monastery to the Novodevichy Cemetery. His body was found face down, which sparked rumors that Gogol was buried alive.

PLOT SUMMARY

"The **Overcoat**" follows the life and death of Akaky Akakievich Bashmachkin, a low-ranking official who works as a copyist in a nameless department in the Russian bureaucracy. The Narrator suggests that Akaky Akakievich is destined for a mediocre and insignificant life from birth: his family name, Bashmatchkin, comes from the word *bashmak*, meaning "shoe," while the name Akaky Akakievich (which has the same ridiculous redundancy as the name "John Johnson") was given to him by his mother, who felt that her child was destined for that name. Akaky Akakievich lives an extremely dull life, devoting himself entirely to his copy work. He neglects every other aspect of his life: he does not care about his appearance, does not notice the taste of his food, does not socialize with the other officials, and barely perceives what is going on around him. The other clerks in his department constantly make fun of him. Usually Akaky does not mind, though sometimes he shouts at them to leave

him alone.

Akaky Akakievich seems to be content with his life, but he also faces the challenge of surviving St. Petersburg's bitter cold. Akaky decides that he needs to get his overcoat repaired. His current coat is old and tattered, and is the butt of many jokes at work. Akaky visits Petrovich, a tailor and a drunkard, to get his coat patched up—but the tailor decides that the garment is so worn out that it is not worth repairing. He insists that Akaky must commission a new overcoat for the price of one hundred fifty rubles. Akaky, stunned, has no idea where he would get that kind of money. Nevertheless, he convinces Petrovich to sell him the coat for eighty rubles, and over the next few months he lives frugally, going hungry in order to save up enough money for his new coat. With an unexpected bonus from his department director, Akaky and Petrovich are able to purchase decent cloth and fur, and Petrovich, after working on the overcoat for two weeks, personally delivers the magnificent new coat to Akaky's house.

When he arrives at work wearing his overcoat, Akaky's coworkers congratulate him and insist that they celebrate his good fortune that night. Akaky is at first embarrassed by the attention, but eventually he relents. That night, he walks to the apartment of a fellow official, who lives in a wealthy district of St. Petersburg. All of the partygoers compliment Akaky on his new coat, and then return to their merriment. Akaky feels very out of place in this setting until his coworkers push him to drink some champagne. This lifts the clerk's spirits, but he decides to sneak out of the party at midnight, as it is late. On his way home, Akaky is accosted by two thieves in a square—they beat him and steal his coat. The watchman in the square claims not to have witnessed the event, and tells Akaky to report the incident to the police in the morning.

Akaky, cold and distressed, returns home, where his landlady advises him to go directly to the District Police Superintendent. Akaky goes to his house the next morning, and waits the entire day before he is admitted into the District Superintendent's office. But the official, upon hearing Akaky's story, becomes suspicious of Akaky himself. Akaky leaves, unable to convince the Superintendent to help him. The next day, he goes to his department wearing his old, tattered cloak. Upon seeing him, one of his coworkers advises him not to go to the police, who only work when it will improve their position in the hierarchy. Instead, he tells Akaky to appeal to an "Important Person" who might exert some real influence.

Akaky seeks the help of this Important Person, who is kind to his friends, but who enjoys flaunting his important government status and enforcing a rigid bureaucratic process. When Akaky arrives, the Important Person is shooting the breeze with an old friend, and makes Akaky wait just to demonstrate his power. When he finally allows the clerk to enter his office, Akaky awkwardly explains that his cloak has been stolen. But his familiarity offends the Important Person, who tells Akaky that he should have appealed to him through the appropriate bureaucratic channels. Akaky replies that he does not trust secretaries, which further angers the Important Person. He shouts at Akaky until he leaves the office in a daze.

Feeling faint, Akaky walks through a snowstorm to reach his apartment, and is quickly struck by a fever, which intensifies quickly. As Akaky approaches death, he has visions of Petrovich, the men who robbed him, and his old, tattered coat. When he dies, barely anyone notices, and St. Petersburg goes on as it always has. After his department finds out that he has passed, they immediately replace Akaky with a new official. But rumors begin to spread that a ghost has been stalking the city, stealing the coats from people that it passes. One night the Important Person, leaving a party, decides to visit his mistress's house. On his way there, he feels a hand on his collar and turns around to see the ghost of Akaky Akakievich. The ghost demands the Important Person's cloak. Terrified, the official immediately throws his cloak at the ghost and drives home as quickly as possible. From then on, he treats his subordinates with a bit more humility, and Akaky's ghost is not seen again. In closing, the Narrator mentions one incident in which a watchman in Kolomna follows a ghost until it turns around. The watchman does not act, but notices that this ghost is too tall to be Akaky. This ghost wears a large mustache, and walks off into the night, toward the Obukhoff Bridge.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Akaky Akakievich Bashmachkin – A low-level official clerk in an unknown department in the Russian government. Akaky Akakievich is a short man with an "unmemorable" appearance. He is somewhat educated, and not at the lowest rank of bureaucracy, but he is still very poor. Akaky lives an extremely mundane life: both in and out of his department, he spends all of his time diligently copying documents. While his fellow officials are out socializing, Akaky prefers to spend his evening hours at home, finding contentment in his repetitive labor. Gogol's story revolves around Akaky's struggle to contend with St. Petersburg's bitter cold, which forces him to purchase a new **overcoat**—a mission that endows Akaky's existence with greater meaning.

Petrovich – Formerly a serf, Petrovich is a tailor and a heavy drinker. He is commissioned by Akaky Akakievich to create a new **overcoat**, and eventually consents to make it for the lowest possible price. The care and pride he takes in making Akaky's new overcoat is evident, and the originality of his work provides a contrast to the repetitive nature of Akaky's government job.

The Important Person – An anonymous, high-ranking official in the Russian government. Akaky Akakievich appeals to him

when his **overcoat** is stolen. While the Important Person used to be kind at heart (when he was an "insignificant person" not so long ago), his important status in the bureaucracy has inflated his ego. He enjoys enforcing a rigid hierarchical process, in which information has to be passed from the lowest to highest officials in his department before reaching him. The Important Person treats Akaky poorly in order to show off his importance to a friend, but then feels guilty about it later.

The District Police Superintendent – Akaky Akakievich tries to get the District Police Superintendent to investigate the case of his stolen **overcoat**, but fails—indeed, the Superintendent treats Akaky more like a guilty suspect than the victim of a crime. It is implied that the Superintendent and his subordinate police officers only work on cases that will boost their reputation in the eyes of their superiors.

The Narrator – While the Narrator is not exactly a character in "The **Overcoat**," the story's unusual narrative style has a huge influence on the reader's experience. The Narrator draws attention to himself by withholding information, such as the name of Akaky Akakievich's department and the identity of the Important Person. He injects his own opinions about characters and the bureaucratic system in general, and manipulates the short story genre in which he is operating. The reader gets the sense that the Narrator is inside the same system as Akaky Akakievich, but also has a birds-eye view of that system's oppressive power.

The Young Official – A young man new to Akaky Akakievich's office. He is moved to pity when the other officials make fun of Akaky, and Akaky's defensive exclamations seem to the young official to mean "I am thy brother." The young official remembers this for a long time, and feels ashamed about the state of man's inhumanity to man. His realization marks the story's shift from a rather straightforward comedy to a more complex kind of tragicomedy.

The Assistant Head Clerk – An official in Akaky Akakievich's office. The assistant head clerk is higher ranked and wealthier than Akaky is, but he offers to throw a party partly to celebrate Akaky's new **overcoat**. The assistant head clerk lives in a wealthy district far from Akaky's home, and Akaky's overcoat is stolen on his way home from the party.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Landlady – Akaky Akakievich's landlady. She tries to give him advice when his **overcoat** is stolen, and takes care of purchasing Akaky's coffin after his death.

The Thieves – Two bearded men who steal Akaky Akakievich's **overcoat** on his way home from a party.

The Watchman – The watchman is supposed to be guarding the square where the thieves steal Akaky Akakievich's **overcoat**. When Akaky confronts him about ignoring the crime, the watchman claims that he thought the thieves were Akaky's friends, and he advises Akaky to talk to the police about the matter instead.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

BUREAUCRACY AND SELFHOOD

Nikolai Gogol's Russia was a country run by an extremely unwieldy bureaucracy. Under the control of Tsar Nicholas I, the government was large, slow, and corrupt. Much of this was due to the fact that many of the civil servants in the Russian system were uneducated and very poor. In "The Overcoat," Akaky Akakievich Bashmachkin is one such civil servant. Though he can read and write and is not at the lowest rung of the bureaucratic hierarchy, he can still barely support himself. Over the course of the story, Gogol reveals the ways in which Akaky Akakievich's individuality is oppressed and denied by his bureaucratic society, to the point where he is neglected at the time of his greatest need.

From the story's outset, Gogol presents Russia's bureaucratic oppression as a major theme. The narrator is unwilling to name the department in which Akaky Akakievich worked, fearing censorship or some other form of retribution. The clerk's superiors are described as dictators, and Akaky is paid so little that he can barely survive the brutal cold in St. Petersburg. The difficulty of Akaky Akakievich's life is compounded by the incompetence of this bureaucracy, which we see at work when he attempts to report the theft of his prized **overcoat**. A fellow clerk informs him that it would be useless to go to the police, who only work to please their superiors, and would not return to the overcoat even if they found it. Akaky Akakievich then seeks the help of an "Important Person," and there discovers that Russia's higher-ups care more about maintaining their appearance of importance than actually performing government work. By directly communicating with the Important Person instead of going through the "proper channels," Akaky violates the superior official's sense of hierarchy. Offended, the Important Person angrily throws Akaky out of his office: Akaky Akakievich's individual needs are completely neglected in favor of the preservation of a strict bureaucratic hierarchy and the egos of the officials within it.

Interestingly, though Akaky Akakievich suffers under this bureaucratic system, he genuinely enjoys his bureaucratic job. Unlike the protagonist of Herman Melville's story "Bartleby the Scrivener"—a copier who refuses to bear the drudgery of his work, and ultimately chooses to die rather than live under the

heel of an oppressive system—Akaky Akakievich is content to be a cog in the Russian government. He works, as Gogol writes, "*with love*." Outside of his job, the clerk has no other concerns: all he does is eat, sleep, and copy. It appears that his selfhood consists entirely of his position in the bureaucracy. In this way, he is not so different from the other civil servants in Gogol's story, who are all keen to preserve their status within the government. Just as the minor bureaucrats copy their higher-ups to gain approval, so Akaky copies documents. He loves copying so much that his work supplants his individuality. The clerk's lack of inner life and agency becomes clear when he is unable to make even a minor change to a document, preferring instead to copy it word for word. Akaky Akakievich embodies the stagnancy and incompetency of the bureaucracy, while simultaneously bearing its repressive effects.

THE INSIGNIFICANCE OF THE EVERYMAN

One of the tragedies Gogol highlights in "The Overcoat" is the insignificance of Akaky Akakievich's life. The clerk's unimportance is felt early on in the story. Gogol's phrase "In a certain department…there worked a certain civil servant" implies that his story could happen to any civil servant in any department, and therefore that Akaky Akakievich's life is more or less interchangeable. His interchangeability is reinforced by his occupation as a copyist, a job that has become the entirety of his life. Akaky's work, and therefore his personhood, is based on the concept of reproducible and interchangeable material. Throughout the story, both his superiors and his peers treat Akaky Akakievich poorly, and his worthlessness is exacerbated by the fact that he never rises in the bureaucracy. All of his peers are younger than he is and lead more interesting lives, and they frequently make jokes at his expense. Only once in the story, when Akaky protests, does a fellow civil servant (the young official) realize how cruelly they are treating the copyist. Immediately the young official feels ashamed at how cruelly human beings can treat each other, even when they pretend to be the most honorable of men.

Akaky's life is so devoid of meaning and complexity that it may even be difficult for the reader to feel sympathy for him. Though Akaky Akakievich is apparently content with his lot, Gogol's descriptions of his mundane and pathetic life challenge the reader's ability to empathize with the clerk. Gogol at once allows the reader to scoff at Akaky Akakievich's absurd ignorance, and challenges the reader to find humanity in the most laughable and insignificant of beings. When the protagonist dies, Gogol writes, "And St. Petersburg carried on without its Akaky Akakievich just as though he had never even existed." By presenting the tragicomic fall of Akaky Akakievich, Gogol draws attention to the mundane life of a member of the silent majority, and he tests the reader's ability to care about those no one cares for.

At the end of his tale, however, Gogol seeks a sort of redemption for the neglected everyman. Akaky Akakievich takes the form of a ghost who haunts St. Petersburg, stealing the **overcoats** of the officials who would have ridiculed him during his lifetime. He ultimately gets his revenge on the Important Person who cast him away, so terrifying him that the official adopts a more humble tone from then on. By forcing these officials to experience the brutal winter without an overcoat, Akaky Akakievich's ghost exposes them to the lives of the powerless and the insignificant. And by confronting them with his corpse, he compels them to recognize his life's inherent significance.

MATERIALISM, MATERIAL GOODS, AND ART

Though his fellow bureaucrats treat Akaky Akakievich as an uninteresting character through most of the story, his prized **overcoat** briefly raises his status in the workplace. Indeed, it's comical how differently his colleagues interact with him: the day he arrives with his new coat, he is immediately surrounded, congratulated, and complimented, and is invited to a party that night. Akaky Akakievich, too, sees himself in a new light. He is more cheerful than usual, and he does not follow his usual routine of eating, working, and sleeping; instead, he allows himself to rest after dinner, and then departs for the party. Out on the street, where previously he would notice nothing of interest, he looks in awe at people and objects that suddenly appear to him as beautiful. As Gogol writes, "Akaky Akakievich surveyed this scene as though he had never witnessed anything like it in his life. For some years now he had not ventured out at all in the evenings."

On the one hand, Gogol reveals the absurdity of human interaction—so little (just an overcoat) separates others from seeing Akaky Akakievich as boring and insignificant, or as deserving of respect and admiration. In this light, Gogol's focus on the overcoat as a material good emphasizes the superficiality of Russian society, and mirrors the modern world's scorn for people who are "materialist" and shallow.

On the other hand, Akaky Akakievich's overcoat embodies the actual importance of material goods in human life, especially to the poor. On the most basic level, Akaky Akakievich's coat allows him to survive the punishing winter in St. Petersburg. This improvement not only raises his standard of living, but also expands his range of activity. Suddenly accepted by his peers and able to venture outdoors at night, Akaky Akakievich begins to find meaning beyond his mundane life as a homebody and copyist.

The power of material is perhaps best illustrated in the tailor Petrovich's creation of the overcoat. In this passage, the care and attention Petrovich gives to the garment is clear. He works

at the coat for two weeks and delivers it himself to Akaky Akakievich's home. As Gogol writes, "He seemed to know full well that his was no mean achievement, and that he had suddenly shown by his work the gulf separating tailors who only relined or patched up overcoats from those who make new ones, right from the beginning." Here, Gogol depicts the tailor as an artist, proud of his creativity. By bringing something new into the world, Petrovich has found something meaningful in life. Likewise Akaky Akakievich, now the owner of the overcoat, finds his own identity enhanced. As the possessor of an original work, he is no longer defined by his position as a copyist. In the overcoat, we can read Gogol's argument for the liberating power of art.

SOCIAL STATUS AND FATE

Early on in "The Overcoat," Gogol gives his readers the strong sense that Akaky Akakievich's life is destined for mediocrity. His family name, Bashmachkin, derived from the Russian word *bashmak*, meaning "shoe," already indicates his low social standing. In addition, the narrator notes that his "far-fetched" given name, Akaky Akakievich, was actually fated, as he was named after his father. When they christen baby Akaky, Gogol writes, the baby "wept and made a grimace, as though he foresaw that he was to be a titular counsellor." From the outset, the protagonist is placed into a low social class from which he will not escape. Gogol's description of his protagonist's origins, while comic, also implies that Akaky Akakievich is resigned to his lot from a young age.

Akaky Akakievich's low social standing determines how he is treated throughout the story. It almost seems like the world is conspiring against him: for example, Gogol describes Akaky Akakievich's "strange knack" of walking beneath windows just as trash is being thrown out of them. Furthermore, his position in the world seems to determine how he behaves. Outside of his low bureaucratic post, Gogol writes, "nothing else existed as far as he was concerned." He does not notice happenings on the street or the taste of his food. He merely does his duty and goes to bed. The clerk's vision of the possibilities in life is extremely, and fatally, limited.

Though Akaky Akakievich seems content with his mundane life, his poverty makes it impossible for him to maintain his standard of living. In Russia's corrupt bureaucratic society, the unambitious Akaky Akakievich is tossed aside and forgotten. And even if Akaky Akakievich were a more enterprising individual, Gogol casts doubt on the possibility that he might find success. The fact that his **overcoat** is stolen so quickly after he procured it seems an especially potent demonstration of the difficulty of social mobility. Thus in "The Overcoat," Akaky Akakievich's social status is closely tied to his fate. His status dooms him to a life of poverty and makes his struggle to survive utterly futile—he is not "important" enough to be cared for by anyone. Ultimately, the story suggests that the powerless are only remembered once they are dead, and even then only as "ghosts" who haunt the lives of those who neglected them.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE OVERCOAT

Fyodor Dostoevsky's comment, "We all come out of Gogol's 'Overcoat'," may indicate how broadly the symbol of the overcoat can be interpreted. The coat represents a number of different ideas, and its meaning also shifts as the story progresses. At the outset, Akaky Akakievich's need for a new overcoat is driven by a basic human need: he has to survive the St. Petersburg cold. Here, the coat represents a baseline standard of living that is difficult for Akaky to obtain as a low-level government bureaucrat—in order to save up enough money for the coat, he has to go hungry for several months. Later, the care invested into the coat by Petrovich the tailor endows the coat with greater meaning, as the coat is not only a means of survival, but also a kind of work of art. The overcoat then becomes a symbol for the significance that care and material goods can bring in life. Akaky also experiences this, as he senses that his mission to save up for the coat gives his life a new purpose. The coat allows Akaky, whose life has been extremely dull and repetitive up until then, to experience the feeling of being a unique individual.

When Akaky Akakievich finally obtains the overcoat, it begins to represent the social interactions that determine status and success. Over the course of the story, it becomes more apparent that the bureaucracy Akaky belongs to is based on appearances and superficial status symbols: officials only work when they believe it will raise their social stature, and higher-ups are more interested in maintaining their reputation than assisting the helpless. Akaky's new coat immediately makes his coworkers treat him with more respect, but when he loses the coat they once again forget about him.

Because "The Overcoat" is such a famous and well-studied story, the titular symbol has been interpreted in several other ways throughout history as well. A more Freudian, psychoanalytic perspective of the overcoat focuses on the coat as symbolic of a spouse, or for sexual desire itself. Akaky only expresses himself and his sexuality (chasing after women, basically) once he buys the overcoat. The overcoat then becomes a stand-in for a lover for Akaky, as he treats it with tenderness and adoration, and when he receives it he feels "as if he were married." Ultimately, the overcoat itself is such a complex symbol, and so simply presented, that its very

ordinariness is what makes Gogol's story so extraordinary.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Classics edition of *The Diary of a Madman, the Government Inspector, and Selected Stories* published in 2006.

The Overcoat Quotes

In one of our government departments...but perhaps I had better not say exactly *which* one. For no one's more touchy than people in government departments, regiments, chancelleries or, in short, *any* kind of official body. Nowadays every private citizen thinks the whole of society is insulted when he himself is.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Akaky Akakievich Bashmachkin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 140

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator opens the story by referring to an anonymous government department, refusing to specify which one on the grounds that it might cause offence. The narrator laments the fact that nowadays people tend to think that "the whole of society is insulted" when they are insulted as individuals––the reverse of "taking it personally." This opening paragraph establishes the absurdist, comic tone of the story, while grounding it in serious criticism of Russian society. By listing the names of different bureaucratic institutions––"government departments, regiments, chancelleries, or, in short, any kind of official body"––the narrator illustrates the vast and complex expanse of these institutions within the Russian world.

This passage also demonstrates the way in which people's individual identities are collapsed into the bureaucratic systems in which they work. The narrator's comment about citizens taking personal criticism as an insult to "the whole of society" is somewhat counterintuitive; surely it is more usual for this problem to work the other way around, where general comments are taken personally. However, in a culture in which people lose their sense of self through mindless, tedious bureaucratic work, perhaps it makes sense that this perverse paranoia emerges.

As for his rank in the civil service...he belonged to the species known as eternal titular counsellor, for far too long now, as we all know, mocked and jeered by certain writers with the very commendable habit of attacking those who are in no position to retaliate. His surname was Bashmachkin, which all too plainly was at some time derived from *bashmak*.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Akaky Akakievich Bashmachkin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 140

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has introduced Akaky Akakievich, the civil servant around which the story revolves, and described him as short, balding, and unattractive. The narrator notes that Akaky is a not particularly high-ranking official, and occupies a role people jokingly refer to as "eternal titular counsellor," in reference to the bland, monotonous nature of government bureaucracy and the way that people who have this particular role never seem to "move up" or "get ahead." While the narrator refers disapprovingly of the "certain writers" who use the joke to make fun of people "who are in no position to retaliate," this is ironic, as the narrator himself makes use of the joke to describe Akaky. This irony establishes the narrator's ambivalent treatment of Akaky, which combines mockery and sympathy.

The fact that Akaky's surname, Bashmachkin, is derived from the word "bashmak," meaning shoe, further conveys that Akaky is a comically ignoble character, who is metaphorically "trodden on" by other people and by the structure of the society in which he lives.

The child was christened and during the ceremony he burst into tears and made such a face it was plain that he knew there and then that he was fated to be a titular counsellor. So, that's how it all came about. The reason for all this narrative is to enable our reader to judge for himself that the whole train of events was absolutely predetermined and that for Akaky to have any other name was quite impossible.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Akaky Akakievich Bashmachkin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 141

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has explained how Akaky Akakievich came to have such an absurd and redundant name: although his godparents suggested many different names, Akaky's mother rejected them all, eventually deciding to simply give Akaky the same name as his father (who was also a government official). The narrator jokes that, at his christening ceremony, Akaky made a face because "he knew then and there that he was fated to be a titular counsellor," and stresses the inevitability of both Akaky's repetitive, unappealing name, and the corresponding monotony of his life. This part of the story highlights the rigidity of Russian society. Akaky's fate is determined at birth, and he is destined to perform the same role and even take on the same identity as his father.

This passage can also be read as a comic reversal of the way in which a conventional story––such as a fairy tale––might begin with a description of the hero's auspicious, noble origins. Where we might ordinarily describe someone as "destined for great things," the narrator implies the opposite is true of Akaky: he is destined for boring, mundane, and unfortunate things. By using the words "absolutely predetermined" and "impossible," the narrator emphasizes the illogical nature of the rigid hierarchical structure of Russian society. There is no real *reason* why Akaky's fate was so inescapably predestined, but everyone still sees to accept it as unquestionable.

> No matter how many directors and principals came and went, he was always to be seen in precisely the same place, sitting in exactly the same position, doing exactly the same work—just routine copying, pure and simple. Subsequently everyone came to believe that he had come into this world already equipped for his job, complete with uniform and bald patch.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Akaky Akakievich Bashmachkin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 142

Explanation and Analysis

Having described Akaky's birth and how he came to have his name, the narrator moves on to describe his career as a civil servant. The narrator has noted that no one remembers how Akaky came to be given his particular role in the anonymous government department where he works, but says it is as if "he had come into this world already equipped for his job." This passage employs a particular combination of humor, absurdity, and dull realism to describe Akaky's life and the world in which he lives. The comment that Akaky was born ready for his job, "complete with uniform and bald patch," is very humorous, while simultaneously illustrating the dreary, wearying nature of Russian government bureaucracy.

The description of Akaky's job also emphasizes the repetitive monotony of his life. Even as other things in his office change, Akaky remains "sitting in exactly the same position, doing exactly the same work"––an image that brings to mind a robot more than a person. Indeed, the fact that Akaky's job is limited to copying and never producing anything himself further confirms the mechanical character of his life and role at the government department. In this sense Akaky is a strange, unnerving character, as he does not seem to possess the varied moods, opinions, and vitality we tend to expect of people.

> And for a long time afterwards, even during his gayest moments, he would see that stooping figure with a bald patch in front, muttering pathetically: “Leave me alone, why do you have to torment me?” And in these piercing words he could hear the sound of others: “I am your brother.” The poor young man would bury his face in his hands and many times later in life shuddered at the thought of how brutal men could be and how the most refined manners and breeding often concealed the most savage coarseness, even, dear God, in someone universally recognized for his honesty and uprightness...

Related Characters: The Narrator, Akaky Akakievich Bashmachkin (speaker), The Young Official

Related Themes:

Page Number: 143

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has described the way in which Akaky is constantly bullied by the other clerks at his office, most of whom are younger than him. Akaky usually ignores them and never stands up for himself, only occasionally begging them to leave him alone. Over time, only one clerk is moved to feel sympathy for Akaky, and many years later comes to be haunted by his coworkers' merciless taunting, believing it to show the cruelty of humanity. This passage reveals that, for all its comic levity, there is a dark, morally urgent

exploration at the heart of the story. Despite being completely harmless and inoffensive, Akaky is ruthlessly taunted by his coworkers, who seem to target him precisely *because* of his weakness.

The fact that the Young Official is the only character who pities Akaky further emphasizes that people tend to have a highly limited capacity for compassion. Meanwhile, the reader is forced to reckon with his or her own ethical position, as Akaky is portrayed in such an unappealing, comic light. By laughing at Akaky's strange manner and unfortunate life, is the reader participating in the same cruel behavior as the clerks who bully him?

his dull work seems absurd and laughable, and it is certainly described by the narrator in comic terms. And yet, the story also seems to question why it is so absurd. Passion and enjoyment, after all, are often thought of as rather arbitrary and subjective, so why should anyone laugh at someone engaged in such a passion, even if it is copying.Furthermore, Akaky's dedication at work is clearly not motivated by the desire for more money or power, as he deliberately avoids getting a promotion. With this in mind, shouldn't the love and contentment he finds in his work be seen as noble, admirable, and even enviable rather than something to be mocked?

> One would be hard put to find a man anywhere who so lived for his work. To say he worked with zeal would be an understatement: no, he worked *with love*. In that copying of his he glimpsed a whole varied and pleasant world of his own... Apart from this copying nothing else existed as far as he was concerned.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Akaky Akakievich Bashmachkin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 143

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has explained that, despite his commitment to this job, Akaky has never been promoted; during the one instance in which he was considered for a promotion, his supervisor asked him to make a minor adjustment to a document and Akaky, flummoxed, asked to be given something to copy instead. It is completely beyond Akaky's ability to do anything even slightly creative, though it's never clear if that is a result of his own nature or because the "inevitability" of his boring life in the bureaucracy has drained any creativity out of him.

In this passage, the narrator also describes Akaky's exceptional dedication to the his work, saying that he "worked with love" and that "nothing else existed" to him. Framing Akaky's relationship to his boring, inconsequential job in such romantic terms is humorous, while drawing out significant questions about the nature of work, passion, and happiness.

The narrator never reveals precisely why Akaky so devotes himself to his boring and monotonous job, and this increases the strange mystery of his character. His love for

> St Petersburg harbours one terrible enemy of all those earning four hundred roubles a year—or thereabouts. This enemy is nothing else than our northern frost, although some people say it is very good for the health.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 146

Explanation and Analysis

Due to his immense satisfaction with his job, Akaky is happy with his life. The only problem he faces is the extremely cold weather in St. Petersburg, which the narrator notes is the "terrible enemy" of everyone earning four hundred roubles a year in the city. This issue, while introduced as somewhat minor, sets off the chain of events that will eventually lead to Akaky's death.

The power of the "northern frost" to drastically alter and ultimately end Akaky's existence shows that, despite the seeming importance of man-made institutions such as government bureaucracy, material circumstances are the true arbiter of life and death. While the narrator mentions that some people claim the cold is "good for the health," the story disproves this idea, implicitly rejecting the notion that there is something redemptive about suffering.

"I'm afraid it can't be done, sir," replied Petrovich firmly. "It's too far gone. You'd be better off if you cut it up for the winter and made some leggings with it, because socks aren't any good in the really cold weather. The Germans invented them as they thought they could make money out of them." (Petrovich liked to have a dig at Germans.) "As for the coat, you'll have to have a *new* one, sir."
The word "new" made Akaky's eyes cloud over and everything in the room began to swim round. All he could see clearly was the pasted-over face of the general on Petrovich's snuff-box.

Related Characters: The Narrator, Petrovich (speaker), Akaky Akakievich Bashmachkin

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 150

Explanation and Analysis

Akaky has taken his old, tattered overcoat to Petrovich, the alcoholic tailor. Noticing that Petrovich is sober instead of drunk as usual, Akaky grows nervous; he stares at the image of a general on Petrovich's snuffbox, over which Petrovich has stuck a square piece of paper. Akaky's strong reaction to Petrovich's insistence that the coat cannot be mended further emphasizes Akaky's weak, pathetic character. Rather than face Petrovich directly, Akaky chooses to stare at the face of the general, a symbol of authority. On the other hand, Akaky's despair at the news about his coat is also somewhat understandable, considering he does not have enough money for a new coat, yet needs one to survive the cold.

Frankly, Akaky Akakievich found these privations quite a burden to begin with, but after a while he got used to them. He even trained himself to go without any food at all in the evenings, for his nourishment was *spiritual*, his thoughts always full of that overcoat which one day was to be his. From that time onwards his whole life seemed to have become richer, as though he had married and another human being was by his side. It was as if he was not alone at all but had some pleasant companion who had agreed to tread life's path together with him; and this companion was none other than the overcoat with its thick cotton-wool padding and strong lining, made to last a lifetime. He livened up and, like a man who has set himself a goal, became more determined.

Related Characters: Akaky Akakievich Bashmachkin

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 153-154

Explanation and Analysis

Having realized he has no choice but to try to gather enough money for a new coat, Akaky decides he must forego many of the items he usually spends money on, including tea, candles, and even food. While at first this decision feels like "quite a burden," eventually Akaky finds that it gives him a new sense of purpose, "as though he had married and another human being was by his side." This newfound vitality suggests that Akaky's life, without his even realizing it, previously lacked a sense of meaning; while he derives pleasure and satisfaction from his civil service work, the endless monotony of copying does not provide the same sense of direction and momentum as the goal of buying a new coat.

This passage provides compelling evidence for the interpretation that the overcoat takes on symbolic sexual significance within the story. Akaky is presented as being in a kind of romantic haze, adopting the behaviors (loss of appetite, obsessive thoughts, increased vigor) that we usually associate with being in love. Akaky's fantasies about the coat, "with its thick cotton-wool padding and strong lining," can be read as an example of commodity fetishism, in which Akaky imbues the object of the overcoat with value disproportionate to its material properties. Like a newlywed who dreams he will live "happily ever after," Akaky fixates on the robust nature of the coat, which is "made to last a lifetime."

It was...precisely *which* day it is difficult to say, but without any doubt it was the most triumphant day in Akaky Akakievich's whole life when Petrovich at last delivered the overcoat... Petrovich delivered the overcoat in person—just as a good tailor should. Akaky Akakievich had never seen him looking so solemn before. He seemed to know full well that his was no mean achievement, and that he had suddenly shown by his own work the gulf separating tailors who only relined or patched up overcoats from those who make new ones, right from the beginning.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Akaky Akakievich Bashmachkin

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 155

Explanation and Analysis

Having spent months living frugally and saving money, Akaky is surprised by the director of his department giving him a bonus, and is eventually able to pay Petrovich to make the new overcoat. They buy materials together, and when the coat is finished, Petrovich delivers it to its new owner in person. The narrator describes this moment as "the most triumphant day in Akaky Akakievich's whole life," a superlative that is simultaneously comically absurd and strangely moving. While both Akaky and Petrovich are flawed and not particularly likeable, the fact that through their combined efforts they create something exceptional provides a note of optimism within the story.

On the other hand, this exaggerated sense of triumph in the midst of an otherwise bleak, depressing narrative suggests that this moment of good fortune may turn out to be too good to be true. The fact that Akaky and Petrovich are portrayed as unfortunate characters tinges their achievement with the anticipation of tragedy, and signals that it is doomed to eventually go wrong.

> At first Akaky Akakievich had to pass through some badly lit, deserted streets, but the nearer he got to the civil servant's flat the more lively and crowded they became, and the brighter the lamps shone. More and more people dashed by and he began to meet beautifully dressed ladies, and men with beaver collars. Here there were not so many cheap cabmen with their wooden basketwork sleighs studded with gilt nails. Instead, there were dashing coachmen with elegant cabs, wearing crimson velvet caps, their sleighs lacquered and covered with bearskins. Carriages with draped boxes simply flew down the streets with their wheels screeching over the snow.
> Akaky Akakievich surveyed this scene as though he had never witnessed anything like it in his life. For some years now he had not ventured out at all in the evenings.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Akaky Akakievich Bashmachkin

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 157

Explanation and Analysis

Akaky's coworkers have reacted in a comically favorable way to his new overcoat, congratulating him and insisting that they must celebrate his new possession. A high-ranking official has offered to host a party at his home, which is in a fancy neighborhood; as Akaky approaches the official's apartment, he describes the beautiful dress of the people he sees around him. This passage emphasizes the vast difference the coat has made to Akaky's existence; whereas previously his life was dreary and dull, it is now populated by elegant clothes, fast carriages, and street lamps that glow brighter than in other parts of the city.

It is almost as if Akaky's new overcoat has magically transported him into a new world of beautiful objects. The scene has an unreal quality, exaggerated in the same way as Petrovich's solemnity and the over-the-top enthusiasm of Akaky's colleagues. Akaky himself is like a character in a fairy tale who has arrived in a world with which he has no familiarity.

> Although he was somewhat overwhelmed by this reception, since he was a rather simple-minded and ingenuous person, he could not help feeling glad at the praises showered on his overcoat. And then, it goes without saying, they abandoned him, overcoat included, and turned their attention to the customary whist tables. All the noise and conversation and crowds of people—this was a completely new world for Akaky Akakievich. He simply did not know what to do, where to put his hands or feet or any other part of himself.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Akaky Akakievich Bashmachkin

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 159

Explanation and Analysis

Akaky has arrived at the party and feels awkward, as he is unused to being in this kind of social situation. However, his coworkers have acted in a friendly manner, continuing to heap praises on his coat, and Akaky relaxes. Yet eventually

the other guests turn their attention away from him, and Akaky's awkwardness returns. To some degree, this part of the story may elicit further sympathy for Akaky, as it is not uncommon for people to feel awkwardness at social gatherings. On the other hand, Akaky is unusually bad at handling such situations, confirming the idea that he is like a person who has been transported to a strange and distant land. This impression is further emphasized by the narrator's comment that "this was a completely new world for Akaky Akakievich."

❝ The story of the stolen overcoat touched many of the clerks, although a few of them could not refrain from laughing at Akaky Akakievich even then. There and then they decided to make a collection, but all they raised was a miserable little sum since, apart from any *extra* expense, they had nearly exhausted all their funds subscribing to a new portrait of the Director as well as to some book or other recommended by one of the heads of department—who happened to be a friend of the author. So they collected next to nothing.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Akaky Akakievich Bashmachkin

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 162

Explanation and Analysis

On the way home from the party hosted in his honor, Akaky was robbed by two thieves, who stole his overcoat. Distraught, he has attempted to report the theft to the Superintendent, who is uncooperative and suspicious. At work, Akaky's colleagues have already heard that his coat has been stolen, and treat him with rather limited sympathy. They pool money for a replacement coat, but this turns out to be a rather empty gesture, as they have all used up any extra funds to buy a new portrait of the Director and a book written by a friend of a friend. These details prove that the kindness and generosity extended to Akaky by his colleagues was flimsy and superficial, based on the coat he no longer has and not on him.

While the coat acted as a means by which Akaky came to be accepted and embraced by his colleagues, they are so focused on the social network created by wealth and power that, without his coat, Akaky once again becomes meaningless to them, and some even treat him with the same mocking cruelty as before. The fact that the other civil servants have spent money on a new portrait of the Director, and on a book whose author they are socially connected to, shows the supreme importance of status and power in the story; indeed, these are forces that trump basic moral qualities of kindness and empathy.

❝ What exactly this Important Person did and what position he held remains a mystery to this day. All we need say is that this Important Person had become important only a short while before, and that until then he had been an *unimportant* person. However, even now his position was not considered very important if compared with others which were still more important. But you will always come across a certain class of people who consider something unimportant which for other people is in fact important. However, he tried all manners and means of buttressing his importance.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Important Person

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 163

Explanation and Analysis

One of Akaky's more sympathetic colleagues has advised him that, instead of going to the police to report his stolen coat, Akaky should seek the help of a mysterious Important Person. Like all other identifying details in the story, the exact position of the Important Person and the reason why he is important are not revealed. However, unlike other factors such as the department in which Akaky works, the narrator is not deliberately withholding the information, but admits that he does not know himself. This suggests that there may be something dubious about the Important Person's status, implying that he is perhaps only important because others have arbitrarily decided that this is the case, rather than because of anything he has done to earn himself such a qualification.

The narrator also explains that the Important Person is not that important in comparison to other, more important people, and that it is only recently that he has come to be thought of as important. This further emphasizes the arbitrariness of the Important Person's status, and comically critiques the complex hierarchical structure of Russian society. As the narrator notes, the Important

person is fixated on his own importance ("he tried all manners and means of buttressing his importance"), yet his position within the hierarchy seems to be, objectively speaking, rather groundless. And, by extension, the entire way that the bureaucratic system determines importance seems arbitrary, meaningless, and a mystery even to those who become important, and yet everyone in the system treats the important people as if they have some kind of inherent value (even the important people themselves).

In this Holy Russia of ours everything is infected by a mania for imitation, and everyone apes and mimics his superior.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 163

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has explained that the Important Person might not objectively be particularly important, but that he deliberately increases his own authority by requiring his subordinates to imitate him. The narrator adds that this is a common practice "in this Holy Russia of ours."

Once again, the story reveals the way in which a certain code of behavior is embedded within society for no logical reason, yet goes unquestioned despite its absurdity. Indeed, the "mania for imitation" seems to promote irrational, inefficient, and corrupt behavior, as people fail to think for themselves and instead simply copy what their superiors do. The narrator's use of the phrase "this Holy Russia" is ironic and suggests that, instead of following the example set by religion, people obsessively obey those who are arbitrarily ranked above them.

However, he was quite a good man at heart, pleasant to his colleagues and helpful. But his promotion to general's rank had completely turned his head; he became all mixed up, somehow went off the rails, and just could not cope any more. If he happened to be with someone of equal rank, then he was quite a normal person, very decent in fact and even far from stupid in many respects.
But put him with people only one rank lower, and he was really at sea.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Important Person

Related Themes:

Page Number: 164

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has described the Important Person in vague terms, emphasizing that he is not objectively even that important, but obsessed with increasing his own status and authority. In this passage, the narrator adds that the Important Person is "quite a good man at heart," but that his promotion has left him unable to communicate properly with people of lower ranks. This description introduces further nuance into the story's critique of bureaucratic hierarchy. The narrator suggests that not every arrogant bureaucrat is cruel and power-hungry at heart; rather, good people are corrupted by the systemic obsession with rank.

Indeed, the Important Person is described as being "mixed up" and unable to cope with the consequences of his promotion, a description that emphasizes his vulnerability. This perhaps implies that the Important Person is not particularly qualified for his job, as he is so easily flummoxed by being elevated to a higher rank. The Important Person's reaction to his promotion thus further confirms the dysfunctional nature of government bureaucracy. Rank is all important, and so everyone pursues greater rank and defends their current rank rather than actually doing their jobs efficiently or interacting with other people authentically.

"What do you mean by this, my dear sir?" he snapped again. "Are you unaware of the correct procedure? Where do you think you are? Don't you know how things are conducted here? It's high time you knew that first of all your application must be handed in at the main office, then taken to the chief clerk, then to the departmental director, then to my secretary, who *then* submits it to me for consideration..."
"But Your Excellency," said Akaky Akakievich, trying to summon up the small handful of courage he possessed... "I took the liberty of disturbing Your Excellency because, well, secretaries, you know, are a rather unreliable lot..."
"What, what, what?" cried the Important Person. "Where did you learn such impudence? Where did you get those ideas from? What rebellious attitude towards their heads of department and superiors has infected young men these days?"

Related Characters: The Narrator, Akaky Akakievich

Bashmachkin, The Important Person (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 165-166

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has explained that, although fundamentally the Important Person is "normal" and "very decent," his obsession with his status leads him to treat people ranked below him in an unreasonable fashion. For example, he has deliberately made Akaky wait longer than necessary simply as a way of showing off his power and importance. When Akaky tries to explain his situation and mentions that secretaries can be "a rather unreliable lot," the Important Person explodes with anger, calling Akaky impudent and "rebellious." The fact that the Important Person makes these accusations is comical, as in reality Akaky is about as far from rebellious as it is possible for a person to be. However, the Important Person's fixation with bureaucratic conventions––"the correct procedure"––has clearly clouded his judgment to the point of absurdity.

> Finally poor Akaky Akakievich gave up the ghost. Neither his room nor what he had in the way of belongings was sealed off, in the first place, because he had no family, and in the second place, because his worldly possessions did not amount to very much at all... Whom all this went to, God only knows, and the author of this story confesses that he is not even interested. Akaky Akakievich was carted away and buried. And St Petersburg carried on without its Akaky Akakievich just as though he had never even existed.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Akaky Akakievich Bashmachkin

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 168

Explanation and Analysis

Having failed to find his overcoat again, Akaky has grown ill with a fever. The doctor, certain that Akaky will not survive, has advised Akaky's landlady to order him a cheap coffin. When Akaky does indeed die, St Petersburg carries on "just as though he had never existed." The narrator notes that he is unsure and uninterested in what happened to Akaky's few world possessions. This is perhaps the most obviously tragic moment in the novel. Akaky's death by fever demonstrates the power of the natural elements as the arbiter of life and death––although of course it does not help that Akaky was caught up in a cruel, illogical bureaucracy that hindered him from finding his coat.

The fact that St Petersburg goes on as usual shows that Akaky is as inconsequential in death as he was in life. Meanwhile, the statement that "the author of this story confesses that he is not even interested" in what happened to Akaky's belongings highlights a coldness and cruelty on the part of the narrator, too. Despite the fact that the story is about him, Akaky's life is too dull and pathetic to even be worth rendering in its full detail.

> So vanished and disappeared for ever a human being whom no one ever thought of protecting, who was dear to no one, in whom no one was the least interested, not even the naturalist who cannot resist sticking a pin in a common fly and examining it under the microscope; a being who endured the mockery of his colleagues without protesting, who went to his grave without achieving anything in his life, but to whom, nonetheless (just before the end of his life) a shining visitor in the form of an overcoat suddenly appeared, brightening his wretched life for one fleeting moment; a being upon whose head disaster had cruelly fallen, just as it falls upon the kings and great ones of this earth...

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Akaky Akakievich Bashmachkin

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 168

Explanation and Analysis

Having described Akaky's unceremonious death from fever, the narrator emphasizes Akaky's absolute unimportance to the world. According to the narrator, no one loved Akaky, and he wasn't even as interesting as a fly studied by a biologist; indeed, the only good thing that happened to Akaky in his life was the overcoat, although of course this episode too ends in "disaster." This passage is a key example of the way Gogol combines tragedy and comedy in the story, simultaneously compelling the reader to feel immensely sad for Akaky while laughing at just how absurdly awful and meaningless his life is. The use of a run-on sentence helps

increase the impression that Akaky's life consists of one terrible fact after the next, creating comic momentum.

There is also a note of irony in the fact that the narrator claims "no one was the least interested" in Akaky, as the narrator himself has written a story about him, a story that someone must now be reading. This ironic tone continues within the narrator's description of the overcoat, which is anthropomorphized as a "shining visitor." Once again, the overcoat's ability to drastically transform and improve Akaky's life is humorously exaggerated. The narrator's final comment that disaster fell on Akaky "just as it falls upon the kings and great ones of this earth" reminds us that, while Akaky may have been an exceptionally sad and unlucky character, misfortune happens to everyone. Indeed, this may provide a clue as to the narrator's justification for why this story is worth telling: the tragedy that befell Akaky is somehow shared by all of humanity. And, if Akaky's death is somehow relatable to all humanity, there is an implication that perhaps his meaningless, absurd life is as well.

> But the Important Person's terror passed all bounds when the ghost's mouth became twisted, smelling horribly of the grave as it breathed on him and pronounced the following words: "Ah, at last I've found you! Now I've, er, hm, collared you! It's *your* overcoat I'm after! You didn't care about mine, *and* you couldn't resist giving me a good ticking-off into the bargain! Now hand over *your* overcoat!" The poor Important Person nearly died. However much strength of character he displayed in the office (usually in the presence of his subordinates)... he was so frightened that he even began to fear (and not without reason) that he was in for a heart attack.

Related Characters: Akaky Akakievich Bashmachkin, The Narrator (speaker), The Important Person

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 172

Explanation and Analysis

After Akaky's death, people have begun reporting seeing his ghost on the Kalinkin bridge, stealing people's overcoats as they pass by. Meanwhile, the Important Person has been feeling guilty about how he treated Akaky, and has attempted to reach out to him, only to find that he has died. One day, as the Important Person is leaving a party on the way to see his mistress, Akaky's ghost approaches him and nearly frightens him to death.

This interaction has a cathartic function in the narrative; in the face of Akaky's ghostly presence, the Important Person's ego is immediately deflated and he is terrified. The "strength of character" he displayed "in the presence of his subordinates" does not hold up against the threatening sight of a ghost.

> The encounter had made a deep impression on him. From that time onwards he would seldom say: "How dare you! Do you realize who is standing before you?" to his subordinates. And if he did have occasion to say this, it was never without first hearing what the accused had to say.

Related Characters: The Important Person, The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 172

Explanation and Analysis

Having encountered Akaky's ghost, the Important Person is left shaken, so much so that his daughter comments on how pale he is. From that point forward, the Important Person comes to treat his subordinates in a much more fair and reasonable way. This twist in the narrative is somewhat unexpected; after all the bizarre tragedy and absurdity the story has contained thus far, it is surprising that the ending should contain someone learning a positive moral lesson.

On the other hand, it is also true that many things remain unresolved––the fate of Akaky's ghost is unclear, and at the very end of the story a second ghost is introduced, whose role within the overall narrative is somewhat perplexing. Nonetheless, the Important Person's change of heart emphasizes that even the most meaningless life might hold some meaning (even if that meaning comes only in other people's interpretation of it).

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE OVERCOAT

At the start of the story, the Narrator stops himself from naming the department in which Akaky Akakievich, the main character in his tale, worked. The Narrator decides that it is better to avoid mentioning too many details, as he is worried about offending a sensitive official or other bureaucrat. He comments that these days, every Russian citizen believes the whole state to be insulted when he himself is. He cites a recent incident in which a police inspector complained that the Russian government was riddled with problems, and that people were maligning his name. As evidence the inspector supplied an extremely long romantic novel in which a police inspector often appears, sometimes in a drunken state.

The Narrator's unwillingness to disclose the full details of his tale establishes a background of secrecy and fear, but also of scorn and mockery for the over-sensitive, self-important members of the Russian bureaucracy. We also start to get a sense of the Narrator's voice, which starts off here with a tone of the comic and absurd. The romantic novel emphasizes the ridiculousness of the police inspector's complaint, implying that he has a fantastic and delusional opinion of himself.

The Narrator then goes on to introduce Akaky Akakievich as a civil servant in a "certain department" in St. Petersburg. He is a short man with unmemorable, unattractive features. The Narrator jokes that his official title is "eternal titular counsellor." His family name, Bashmachkin, comes from the word *bashmak*, meaning 'shoe'. The Narrator assures the reader that Akaky Akakievich's name may seem strange, but that it was impossible for him to be given any other name. The Narrator explains the circumstances of Akaky Akakievich's birth. He is born on March 22, and his mother, needing to come up with an appropriate name for the baby, rejects many proposals and finally names him after his father Akaky, sensing that this is fate. During the christening, baby Akaky grimaces, as though foreseeing the dull life ahead of him.

Gogol starts off by painting a very unimpressive picture of Akaky Akakievich, and throughout the story he will test our ability to empathize with this pathetic character. The fact that Akaky's family name is derived from the word "shoe" and that his mother thought it was fate to name her son "Akaky Akakievich"—an absurd name that literally means "mild or inoffensive," and may also refer to the Russian word for excrement—forcefully introduces the idea that one's social status is tied to one's success in life. It's suggested that since the moment of his birth, Akaky has had no choice but to be an insignificant, low-ranking government worker.

The Narrator claims that no one remembers how Akaky Akakievich was appointed to his specific department. Nevertheless, Akaky is a constant presence there—however much the department changes directors, Akaky is always "in precisely the same place, sitting in exactly the same position, doing exactly the same work—just routine copying, plain and simple." No one respects Akaky in the department, and he barely has any civil interactions with his peers. While the younger clerks constantly make fun of him, Akaky usually does not let it affect his work. He always copies his documents diligently and carefully. But at certain moments when the younger officials go too far, Akaky shouts at them to leave him alone. The Narrator says that once, a young official new to the office was so moved to pity that he would remember Akaky's exclamations long after, hearing in his voice the words "I am your brother." Each time he remembers Akaky, the young man is filled with shame at the brutality and inhumanity of man.

Akaky's constant presence in his department establishes how little social mobility he has, and his job as a copyist emphasizes the dull, repetitive nature of his work and life. It also implies that Akaky himself is easily replaceable—he is merely a cog in the Russian bureaucracy. That Akaky works diligently at his copying and rarely interacts with his peers suggests that Akaky has little personality—that he is perhaps a kind of machine, or a non-entity. But when Akaky finally "snaps" and protests against the mockery of the younger officials, the reader realizes that even though Akaky seems so pathetic and uninteresting, he is still a human being, a "brother." The young official, who is haunted by the memory of Akaky's mistreatment, personifies this reaction, and the suddenly poignant scene marks the story's transition from a rather straightforward satirical tale to a more complex kind of tragicomedy.

Akaky loves his job as a copyist so much that he makes it his entire life. He takes joy in reading different documents and carefully copying each letter. But he is never promoted—once, a director who wished to reward Akaky for his hard work ordered him to add a few small changes to a document, but Akaky grew nervous and requested to copy something instead. After this incident, no one offered to promote Akaky again. Beyond copying, the Narrator says, "nothing else existed as far as he was concerned." Akaky neglects his appearance and never pays attention to what is happening around him. He never notices the taste of his food, and after he returns home and has dinner, he continues copying papers that he brought from work. At times when his fellow officials are socializing at the theater, or a dinner parties, Akaky is at home, writing and looking forward to the next day's copying.

Akaky's love for his boring job may strike the reader as bizarre, but by vividly describing Akaky's enjoyment of copying, Gogol challenges our assumption that Akaky himself, like his work, is mechanistic and emotionless. Instead, Gogol proposes that it is possible to find joy in any type of labor one undertakes—even as he also goes back to briefly portraying Akaky as a kind of caricature. The Narrator then immediately turns around and mocks Akaky for neglecting every other aspect of his life—his clothes, food, social life, and immediate surroundings. Akaky's love for his work contributes to his complete ignorance of his own social situation (not to mention his lack of any spiritual, intellectual, or romantic personality), so he is unable to reflect on his lot in life, and therefore unable to take action to improve it.

The Narrator says that Akaky is "perfectly happy with his lot," but that St. Petersburg harbors a major obstacle to those who make the low salary of four hundred rubles per year—the northern cold. Akaky, after being punished by this cold, decides that it is time for him to get a new **overcoat**. Akaky's current coat has been the butt of many jokes in his department, as it is ugly, thin, and tattered. The clerk decides to take the coat to Petrovich, the tailor, to get it repaired. In an aside, the Narrator describes Petrovich as a decent tailor, but a heavy drinker. When Akaky arrives at Petrovich's room, the tailor is angrily trying to thread a needle.

Gogol criticizes the Russian government for paying its civil servants a low salary on which they can barely survive. Akaky's old, worn overcoat becomes a symbol for the government's inability to provide basic needs to its impoverished citizens—even those who work constantly like Akaky. This also introduces the theme of the importance of material goods. At the most basic level, Akaky needs the "commodity" of the overcoat just to be able to survive and continue working.

Akaky, noting that Petrovich appears to be sober, is worried that he will not be able to bargain as effectively. He begins nervously, unable to complete his sentence. Petrovich takes his **coat** and examines it. After some time, he shakes his head and declares it impossible to mend. He insists that Akaky must have a new coat. The tailor's statement troubles Akaky, because he has no money for a new coat. Feeling dizzy, he focuses on the image of a general on Petrovich's snuffbox. A square piece of paper has been pasted onto where the general's face should be. Petrovich tells Akaky that a new coat will cost him a hundred fifty rubles. Akaky, after first traveling in the wrong direction, returns home in a daze.

In this scene, the snuffbox with the faceless general may be an image of the Russian bureaucracy's powerful influence on its citizens, as well as its essentially inhuman nature. Following this logic, it may also be that Petrovich has covered the general's face himself as a petty kind of rebellious act. The snuffbox is also Gogol's subtle commentary on the artificiality of self-presentation: the square covering the general's face is a kind of mask. Throughout the story, Gogol criticizes various characters for only caring about their appearances, shirking their real duties and even basic virtues to instead focus only on appearing important and powerful.

Akaky resolves to return to Petrovich on Sunday morning to try to bargain for his **coat**. When he visits the tailor again, he hands Petrovich a ten-copeck piece and asks him once again to mend his coat. The tailor thanks him for the money, but insists that Akaky needs a completely new coat. Akaky, discouraged, wonders where he will get the money to pay for the brand new garment. Even if the director gives him a generous Christmas bonus of forty or fifty rubles, he already owes most of it to paying off debts he has accrued. He knows that Petrovich might agree to make an overcoat for as little as eighty rubles. Akaky has saved up about forty rubles over the course of several years, but he does not know where he will get the other half.

Gogol emphasizes how poor Akaky Akakievich is. It seems that the clerk is always trying to catch up with himself—whenever he comes into some extra money, he must use it to pay off his debts. This suggests the immense difficulty of trying to improve one's social status and standard of living in Gogol's society. It is especially troubling that Akaky is not even at the lowest rung of the Russian government—the title of titular counsellor belonged to the ninth of fourteen bureaucratic ranks—so we can only imagine how his inferiors manage to survive the cold.

Akaky resolves to deprive himself of many of his ordinary expenses. He stops drinking tea at night, burns no candles, walks lightly so as not to wear out his shoes, and goes hungry at night. The Narrator notes that Akaky's spirit begins to change. With the goal of purchasing a new **overcoat** in mind, he becomes livelier and more decisive. His existence becomes "richer, as though he had married and another human being was by his side." Akaky receives a surprise when his department director awards him a bonus of sixty rubles. After three more months of saving up, Akaky has the eighty rubles he needs. He and Petrovich go shopping for supplies: they purchase good quality cloth and fur at reasonable prices.

The overcoat enriches Akaky's life before he even gets to wear it. His goal, to save up money in order to purchase the coat, gives him a new sense of purpose, a reason to live beyond the drudgery of his copying. Here, Gogol emphasizes the value of material goods not only for basic human survival, but also for emotional and spiritual wellbeing. His comparison of the coat to a wife also illustrates the sense of comfort and safety that the garment will bring, and introduces another level of interpretation to the symbol of the overcoat—the coat as a kind of stand-in for a spouse or for sexuality itself in Akaky's life.

Petrovich works on the **overcoat** for two weeks and charges twelve rubles for the job, the lowest price possible. The Narrator states that it was probably the most triumphant day of Akaky's life when Petrovich personally delivers the overcoat to his home. The coat arrives just in time, for an extreme cold has taken over St. Petersburg. Petrovich proudly displays the coat, which he made from scratch, to Akaky and helps the clerk put it on. It fits perfectly. The tailor declares that it is only because he works on a small street and has known Akaky for so long that he made the coat so cheaply. Akaky pays and thanks Petrovich and sets off for work. Petrovich follows him, watching the coat move off in the distance, and then he runs through a side street so that he can catch a glimpse of Akaky and his overcoat from the front.

Petrovich's pride in creating the overcoat is evident as he hand-delivers it to Akaky's home. The tailor distinguishes himself from other tailors who only repair clothing, and who don't possess the skill to make a completely new garment. Petrovich's ability to create an original work contrasts with Akaky's inability to do anything but copy documents. Here Gogol makes an argument for the value of art (which is another kind of "material good," and arguably the most "elevated" kind) to give new meaning to life, and he consequently adds another layer of symbolism to the overcoat itself. But Gogol's description of Petrovich's solemnity may also make us laugh—it is meant to be both poignant and comical that a new overcoat has such a significant impact on these characters.

At his department, everyone congratulates Akaky on his new **overcoat**. They insist that the event must be celebrated, and that Akaky must host an evening party. Akaky is extremely embarrassed until a higher-ranking civil servant, an assistant head clerk, offers to host the party instead, and invites everyone to tea that night. The other officials accept his invitation, and pressure Akaky to come as well. Akaky passes the rest of the day in a very good mood. Upon returning home, he compares his new cloak to his old one, laughing at the difference. After dinner he does not do any copying, but instead rests until dark, and then heads to the evening party. The Narrator does not remember where the party took place, but asserts that the assistant head clerk lived in a wealthy part of the city, far away from Akaky's home. Akaky must pass through a dimly lit neighborhood before arriving at the bright, lively streets of the assistant head clerk's district.

Gogol draws attention to how differently Akaky's coworkers treat him when they hear about his new overcoat—indeed, the change in their behavior is ridiculously exaggerated. This material possession immediately raises Akaky's status in the department, and highlights the idea that people only care about outward appearances. At the same time, the coat opens up a whole new dimension of experience for Akaky: suddenly he has a social life, and goes out at night for the first time in years. Gogol repeatedly draws out the absurdity of social interactions—they are based on the most superficial self-presentation, but they are also an important element of a fulfilling life.

Akaky gazes with awe upon the high society populating the streets around him. He has not been out at night in years. He looks into a shop window and sees a picture of a beautiful woman displaying a naked foot, as behind her, a man looks at her through a doorway. Akaky laughs and walks on. The Narrator speculates about why Akaky laughed in that moment: perhaps it was because he had encountered something unknown, or, like other officials, he was amused by French customs, or else he was not thinking about anything in particular.

The picture of the beautiful woman introduces a level of sexuality to Akaky's life. In contrast to the beginning of the story, in which Akaky barely noticed his surroundings, we now see him paying attention to things beyond his work. The overcoat has not only raised his social status, but has also introduced him to new ways of relating to the world. The coat has arguably contributed to him "growing up"—becoming more of a complete human adult, which includes a recognition of his sexuality.

Akaky reaches the assistant head clerk's apartment and hangs up his **overcoat**. He enters the main room and is greeted by a bustling scene full of officials, card tables, and conversation. Akaky is unsure of how he should behave, but his fellow clerks greet him happily and crowd into the anteroom to look at his cloak once more. Akaky is overjoyed by their compliments, but soon after this, the officials return to their card games, leaving Akaky alone. Feeling awkward and overwhelmed, Akaky sits down in a stupor. He is tired and wants to leave, but his peers push him to drink champagne. Akaky feels better after having a drink, but as it is midnight, he decides to sneak out of the party. To his dismay, he finds his overcoat is lying on the floor of the anteroom. Akaky picks it up, brushes it off, and leaves the apartment.

Even though the overcoat has raised his reputation among his fellow civil servants, this passage shows that Akaky's social standing is still very limited. The coat impresses his coworkers, but Akaky is still an outsider in their social scene, and he lacks the conversation skills (and, presumably, the inflated ego) to fit in. And though the other officials are friendly to Akaky and courage him to stay, Gogol implies that they do not truly care about the clerk. His overcoat gets knocked to the floor, and no one notices when he leaves. As hard as he has tried, Akaky remains insignificant.

Akaky leaves the party feeling happy. In a flight of fancy, he runs after a lady who passes him on the street, but then immediately stops and again walks quietly down the street, unsure of why he was running. The streets grow deserted and dark. The festive neighborhood he was in transitions into a poorer district of low houses and dim lamps. He enters an empty square, in the middle of which is a watchman's box. Akaky suddenly feels afraid as he enters the square. He closes his eyes, wishing to pass through as quickly as possible. When he opens his eyes, he is suddenly standing in front of two bearded men. One of the thieves grabs his **overcoat**. Akaky is about to shout for help, but then the other thief threatens to hit him. The men take his cloak and push him to the ground, and Akaky loses consciousness.

Again, we see Akaky behaving uncharacteristically with his new overcoat. Whereas before he was only comfortable living according to his strict routine, unable to make even simple changes to documents, now he acts spontaneously and even pursues a sexual or romantic feeling on a whim. He is on the verge of realizing that he has inner desires separate from his boring labor, even if he can't properly comprehend what these ideas are. The tragic loss of his overcoat, then, once again exposes Akaky as a helpless, impoverished man. The overcoat seemed to give Akaky a sense of purpose and value in life, and even to make him into a more complete human being, but now that has been snatched away from him. We cannot help feeling that this was fated to happen all along.

When he recovers, Akaky runs to the watchman in the middle of the square. Sobbing, he shouts at the watchman for completely ignoring his robbery. The watchman replies that he saw two men stop him in the square, but supposed that they were friends. He recommends that Akaky report the robbery to the police in the morning. Akaky returns home covered in snow, a complete mess. He knocks on his door, and his landlady answers. She is shocked to see him in this state, and, upon hearing his story, tells him to go directly to the District Police Superintendent, as the local police officers will be sure to ignore or cheat him. The landlady believes the Superintendent to be a good man, since he goes to church every Sunday and gives everybody a friendly smile. With that, Akaky goes to his room.

It is clear how little the watchman cares about Akaky, and how little his duties as a police officer matter to him. The fact that the watchman turns a blind eye to Akaky's crime is representative of the Russian bureaucracy's negligence of the rampant corruption within its own ranks. Gogol illustrates the superficiality of self-presentation once again when Akaky's landlady recommends that he see the Superintendent, and her only reasons to trust him are the fact that he goes to church and seems like a nice man.

The next morning, Akaky goes to the Superintendent's house, but is told that the Superintendent is asleep. Akaky returns at ten, but the official is apparently still in bed. At eleven, he is informed that Superintendent is not at home. He returns in the evening, but the official's clerks refuse to allow him into the anteroom. Akaky stubbornly says that he must see the Superintendent in person, and that he has come from a government department in an official capacity. The clerks finally allow him to see the Superintendent. Upon hearing Akaky's story, the Superintendent begins to interrogate Akaky instead of focusing on the crime committed. Why did Akaky return home so late? Was he doing anything illicit that night? Akaky, bewildered, leaves without securing the Superintendent's assistance.

The corrupt and unwieldy nature of the bureaucracy is further exposed in this scene, as the clerks do not respond to Akaky's demands until he pretends to be an important government official. The Superintendent's reaction to Akaky's story is also telling. Akaky's low social status clearly influences the way he is treated: the Superintendent does not treat him like the victim of a crime—rather, he treats the clerk as if he *were the criminal. The unprofessional manner in which Akaky's case is handled is due to his complete lack of social or political power in this system. The members of the bureaucracy have been trained to value status above all else, and they neglect basic human decency in their attempts to make themselves seem more important.*

That day, Akaky does not go to his department, but he shows up to work the following morning in his old **overcoat**. The news of his stolen coat has spread around the department, and while many pity him, some still make fun of him. They throw together a small sum of money for Akaky. One of the clerks, genuinely wishing to help, advises him not to go to the police: even if a police officer found the cloak, it would remain in police custody unless Akaky could provide legal proof that he was the coat's owner. Instead, Akaky should appeal to "a certain Important Person" who could truly influence the situation.

Akaky's popularity in his department is short-lived indeed, as it seemingly depended entirely upon his overcoat—now he is back to being as insignificant as ever. The clerk's advice to Akaky emphasizes that in order to achieve anything in Russia's government, one has to have powerful connections that can influence things from above. The inefficiency of the bureaucracy encourages bribery and other forms of corruption.

Akaky decides to seek the help of the Important Person. The Narrator states that the official title of this Important Person is not known. We do know, however, that this individual only recently became an Important Person, and up until then he had been "an unimportant person." The Important Person increases his importance by enforcing strict etiquette amongst his subordinates. Reports must travel through the appropriate channels, passing through several bureaucratic stages before reaching him. The Narrator comments that all of Russia's bureaucracy functions in this way, with every man imitating his immediate superior. The Important Person, the Narrator continues, has grand and exaggerated mannerisms. His conversations are mainly comprised of three phrases: "How dare you?" "Do you know who you're talking to?" and "Do you realize who's standing before you?" While he is fundamentally a kind person, his rank confuses his behavior. When communicating with people of a lower rank he usually falls silent, unsure of how interacting with his inferiors will affect his reputation.

Gogol's use of the vague phrases "Important Person" and "unimportant person" raises questions about the value of this government official, and further satirizes just what is regarded as "important" in such an absurd hierarchy. How do we know that this man is truly important if we don't even know what he does? And what made him suddenly go from "unimportant" to "important?" Gogol implies that these high-ranking government positions are less impressive than they seem, and that the promotions that officials receive are to a large extent arbitrary. Perhaps because of the tenuous and arbitrary nature of his "importance," the Important Person feels the need to reinforce his position by enforcing strict bureaucratic procedure. His subordinates, also wishing to seem important, do the same. Nothing about their actual jobs is mentioned: the bureaucrats Gogol depicts are only concerned with looking *like they are doing something important.*

When Akaky visits the Important Person, the official is chatting with an old friend, and uses Akaky's arrival to demonstrate his own importance. The Important Person tells his secretary that Akaky can wait, just to show his friend how long people have to wait in his anteroom. After some time, he summons Akaky and addresses him rudely. Akaky tongue-tied, attempts to explain that his **overcoat** has been stolen and that he is seeking the official's help. Offended by the inferior clerk's familiarity, the Important Person tells Akaky that he should have gone through the proper bureaucratic channels. Akaky tells him that he believes secretaries to be "a rather unreliable lot." The Important Person, outraged, laments the impertinence of the younger generation of officials, even though Akaky is already in his fifties. The Important Person yells at Akaky until he stumbles out of the office, feeling faint.

Again, we see that this government official is more interested in seeming important and enforcing the bureaucratic hierarchy to maintain his status than actually listening to Akaky's story, or even regarding Akaky as a fellow human being. When Akaky tells the truth, saying that low-ranked bureaucrats are unreliable and ineffective, the Important Person takes that as a personal offence—as if he is a representative of the bureaucracy itself. Once again, the fact that Akaky has no real power or status means that no one will care enough to help him. As Gogol describes it, the Important Person doesn't mean to be cruel, he is just acting the way he thinks he ought to for someone of his position.

Akaky, feeling numb, walks home in a snowstorm. The next day, he is overtaken by a fever. His sickness intensifies quickly, and when a doctor sees him, he declares Akaky to be incurable. The doctor tells the landlady to order a cheap coffin, as Akaky will be unable to afford a more expensive one. The Narrator wonders whether or not Akaky heard the doctor proclaim his death. We do not know, he says, because Akaky is at that moment delirious. Akaky sees visions of Petrovich, the thieves, and his old **overcoat**. In his delirium, he apologizes to the Important Person, but then begins to curse. His voice descends into nonsensical phrases revolving around his overcoat.

The importance of basic material goods once again comes to the fore as Akaky succumbs to illness. Akaky's poverty will even affect him after death, as he will have to be buried in the cheapest possible coffin. Akaky's cursing just before his death suggests his repressed anger regarding his maltreatment and the injustice of his life, and foreshadows his revenge on the Important Person in the form of a ghost.

Akaky finally dies and is buried. No one takes an inventory of his possessions, as he has no heirs and has almost nothing to pass on. St. Petersburg carries on, the Narrator remarks, as if Akaky had never existed. He was not interesting as a person or as an object of study. He was completely mediocre, though toward the end of his life, his new **overcoat** "suddenly appeared, brightening his wretched life for one fleeing moment…." Several days after his death, Akaky's department sends a porter to his house to investigate his whereabouts. After learning that he has died, his department replaces him the next day with a new official with slightly different handwriting.

In both life and death, Akaky is barely noticed, and barely acknowledged by anyone (even, seemingly, the Narrator) as a fellow human being. It is both tragic and comic that the highlight of the clerk's life is the purchase of a new overcoat—that is how mundane and pathetic Akaky's existence is. The fact that Akaky's department does not notice that he has died until several days later further emphasizes his insignificance, and their ability to replace him the next day reminds us that in the bureaucracy's eyes, a copyist's life is completely replaceable.

Soon after Akaky's death, a rumor spreads through the city that a ghost has been appearing on the Kalinkin Bridge seeking a stolen **overcoat** and stripping the cloak off of every man who passes. One official recognizes the dead man as Akaky Akakievich. Reports come in from officials of all ranks that their coats have been stolen and that they have been exposed to the bitter cold of St. Petersburg. Police almost succeed in capturing the ghost: in one episode, a policeman caught Akaky in the act of stealing a cloak and ordered two of his comrades to hold Akaky while he took some snuff. But as the policeman opened his snuffbox, the ghost sneezed and filled all three policemen's eyes with powder. Then he vanished. After that, Akaky's ghost begins to appear even beyond the Kalinkin Bridge, terrorizing everyone around him.

The story now takes a fantastical twist, as Akaky's ghost returns to the mortal world, seeking revenge on those who have wronged him. By stealing their overcoats, he subjects them to the same pain that he suffered—social humiliation and exposure to the cruel St. Petersburg cold. It is ironic that Akaky has much more power in death than in life, and he also seems to have a much more forceful will—it's impossible to imagine the living Akaky confronting superior officials and stealing from them. As usual, there is an element of the comic and the absurd in Gogol's description—Akaky's ghost is somehow both a physical corpse and a supernatural spirit, a presence both mundane and frightening.

The Narrator turns our attention back to the Important Person. He notes that after kicking Akaky out of his office, the Important Person felt guilty, and thought of the clerk frequently afterwards. A week later, he sends an official to Akaky's house to see if he can help, and is troubled to learn that the man is dead. Hoping to distract himself, the Important Person goes to a party at a friend's house that evening. Everyone there is the same rank as he, so he feels completely unconstrained and has a wonderful time. At the end of the evening he decides not to go home, but to instead visit a female friend of his. The Narrator mentions that the official is a good husband and father, but despite the fact that he is satisfied by his family life, he still wants to have a mistress. The Important Person steps into his sledge and instructs the coachman to take him to his mistress's. He reflects happily on the events of the evening, though his thoughts are interrupted occasionally by the cold wind.

The Important Person shakes off his guilt regarding his dismissal of Akaky with relative ease. Gogol highlights the fact that his high rank has a powerful impact on the man's behavior, as he only feels like he can be "himself" when he is among officials of his rank. For the Important Person, every aspect of life is meant to uphold and reinforce his "importance"—he even has a mistress just because that's what is fashionable for high-ranking officials. The arbitrariness of what makes him "important" (especially when he was recently "unimportant") only highlights the unfairness of Akaky's life, as the Important Person's lavish and immoral lifestyle provides a stark contrast to Akaky's life of discipline, poverty, and suffering.

Suddenly, the Important Person feels a hand on his collar. He turns around and sees a short man in an old uniform—Akaky Akakievich. The ghost is very pale. Akaky opens his putrid-smelling mouth and demands that the official give up his **overcoat**. The Important Person, absolutely horrified, throws his cloak at Akaky and commands his coachman to drive him home as quickly as possible. The next morning, the Important Person's daughter comments that he looks very pale. The official does not answer, and does not tell anyone what happened to him that night. The event affects him deeply, however, and he begins to behave more modestly, treating his subordinates with more respect. From that day on, Akaky's ghost is not seen again, though many claim that he still appears in the outskirts of St. Petersburg.

The Important Person, while he feels guilty about Akaky's death, only truly changes when he faces the clerk's ghost. Gogol suggests that those in power must see their "inferiors" as human beings with value and dignity—and not just after they've died. The young official's revelation at the beginning of the story seems to come back and strike the Important Person now, becoming a kind of "moral" for the story. People can be horribly cruel to one another, especially through systems of dehumanization or oppression, and it's crucial to recognize that we are all, at heart, "brothers."

The Narrator mentions that in one instance, a watchman in Kolomna saw a ghost come from behind a house. He dared not arrest it, but followed it until the ghost turned around, raising a large fist, and asked, "What do you want?" The watchman turned away immediately. But, the Narrator says, this ghost was too tall to be Akaky. It wore a large mustache, and went off toward the Obukhoff Bridge.

The existence of another ghost suggests that there are individuals other than Akaky who have been wronged by their superiors in Tsarist Russia. This ghost's great strength (and apparent virile masculinity), illustrated by his large fist and mustache, may imply that the power of the oppressed is growing. At the same time, this final scene also shows Gogol veering off into the absurd again, leaving behind his protagonist and avoiding a neat conclusion to the story of one insignificant clerk in St. Petersburg. Akaky fades away and life goes on, in all its strangeness and absurdity.

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