



Nikolai Gogol's *The Overcoat* and Selected Stories - Special Edition

Nikolai Vasilievich Gogol

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One of the most influential short stories ever written, Nikolai Gogol's "The Overcoat" first appeared in 1842 as part of a four-volume publication of its author's Collected Works. The story is considered not only an early masterpiece of Russian Naturalism—a movement that would dominate the country's literature for generations—but a progenitor of the modern short story form itself. "We all came out from under Gogol's 'Overcoat'" is a remark that has been variously attributed to Dostoevsky and Turgenev. That either or both might have said it is an indication of the far-reaching significance of Gogol's work.

Gogol's writings have been seen as a bridge between the genres of romanticism and realism in Russian literature. Progressive critics of his day praised Gogol for grounding his prose fictions in the everyday lives of ordinary people, and they claimed him as a pioneer of a new "naturalist" aesthetic. Yet, Gogol viewed his work in a more conservative light, and his writing seems to incorporate as much fantasy and folklore as realistic detail. "The Overcoat," which was written sporadically over several years during a self-imposed exile in Geneva and Rome, is a particularly dazzling amalgam of these seemingly disparate tendencies in Gogol's writing. The story begins by taking its readers through the mundane and alienating world of a bureaucratic office in St. Petersburg where an awkward, impoverished clerk must scrimp and save in order to afford a badly needed new winter coat. As the story progresses, we enter a fairy-tale world of supernatural revenge, where the clerk's corpse is seen wandering city streets ripping coats off the backs of passersby. Gogol's story is both comic and horrific—at once a scathing social satire, moralistic fable, and psychological study.

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Introduction to Nikolai Gogol

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