

The Government Inspector

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CONTENTS

1. Act One	24
2. Act Two	51
3. Act Three	76
4. Act Four	103
5. Act Five	142

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Introduction

Author's Biography (1809 -1852)

Nikolai Gogol was an Ukrainian-born Russian dramatist, novelist and short story writer. Gogol, who was named after Saint Nikolai, was born in 1809 in the small town of Velikie Sorochintsy, in Ukraine, which was then part of Russia.

His surname was Ianovskii but he got the name Gogol from his grandfather, who had taken it to claim a noble ancestry.

Nikolai Gogol's parents were landowners who held a position in the Cossack nobility. His father was well educated: an amateur playwright, poet, and gentleman farmer who sent Gogol to the High School for Advanced Study in Nezhin in 1821. Gogol's classmates observed some physical and social peculiarities in him so they nicknamed him "the mysterious dwarf."

In school, he developed an interest in literature and acting. In 1825, Gogol's father died and three years later, in 1828, Gogol graduated from school and went to St. Petersburg, with the intention of working as a government official. However, he only managed to find an ill-paid post in the government.

Gogol tried his hand at writing, but his first publication in 1829, a romantic poem about German idyllic life, which he published at his own expense, was not well received and was met with severe critical reviews. Depressed and disheartened, Gogol bought the remaining copies of his work and burnt them.

After another unsuccessful attempt to find a job in the government, Gogol started teaching history at a girl's boarding school in 1831. He took up writing again and his two-volume collection of stories, *Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka*, derived from Ukrainian folklore, was published in 1831 and 1832. It was an immediate success and he soon



won the admiration of Aleksandr Pushkin, Russia's most eminent literary figure, from whom Gogol sought inspiration for two of his most important works; namely *A Government Inspector* and *Dikinka Tales*.

In 1834, Gogol taught medieval history at Saint Petersburg University but he failed partly due to the insufficiency of his knowledge in addition to the fact that he dedicated most of his time to writing, which was at the expense of the duties of his profession. Gogol soon gave up any pretence of being a well-informed scholar and started skipping lots of his lectures. It was said that at the final examinations he sat in utter silence with a black handkerchief wrapped around his head, pretending to have a toothache, while another professor questioned the students. After spending a year as a professor, Gogol quit his job and became a full-time writer.

During that year, he published two books of short stories, *Mirgorod* (1835) followed by *Arabesques*; a collection of essays. His novel *Taras Bulba* included in *Mirgorod* mirrored Gogol's interest in the history of the Ukrainian Cossacks; In fact, it was the period between 1832 and 1836 that Gogol worked with great energy and came close to Pushkin who influenced his writings. So the inspiration for the play *A Government Inspector* came from the writer Pushkin, who had a similar experience of mistaken identity. Gogol wrote it in 1836 (also translated variously as *The Inspector General*, and *The Inspector*).

The Government Inspector was brought to the attention of the tsar who requested its production. It caused a lot of controversy and as a reaction to the criticism of the government officials to his play, Gogol left Russia and spent the following twelve years travelling through Europe. He stayed in Germany, Switzerland, Paris and finally settled in Rome. He studied art, read Italian literature and developed a passion for opera.

In 1838, Gogol met Count Joseph Vielhorskiy, a 23-year-old gentleman who was suffering from tuberculosis. He grew attached to him and when he died in 1839 Gogol wrote about this time in his *Nights at the Villa*. After the death of Pushkin in 1837 which greatly affected Gogol, he inherited the mantle of the leading Russian writer of the day.

After that, Gogol worked next on *St. Petersburg Stories* (1835-1841). *The Nose*, a masterful comic short story (1835) was later turned into an opera that was first performed in 1930. *The Overcoat*, set in St. Petersburg, was regarded as one of the best short stories ever written. His play *Marriage* (1842), along with the short stories *Diary of a Madman*, *The Tale of How Ivan Ivanovich Quarreled with Ivan Nikiforovich*, *The Portrait* and *The Carriage*, are some of his best-known works that were written during that period.

Gogol's literary masterpiece, the satirical epic *Dead Souls* (unfinished work) was published in 1842.

In 1841 Gogol took the first part of *Dead Souls* to Russia to be printed but it appeared under the title of *The Adventures of Chichikov*, which was imposed by the censorship. This book established Gogol's reputation as a most eminent writer. In 1848 Gogol returned to Russia and though he settled in Moscow he spent his last years moving restlessly throughout the country.

A common metaphor for Gogol's career has been that of "a comet, bursting on the scene, burning itself out quickly, but transforming the configuration of Russian literary culture." It appears suddenly, burns brightly, fades quickly, and with its impact, changes the surrounding landscape and environment forever.

Gogol, after that, became increasingly preoccupied with religious concerns, finally taking advice from a fanatical priest who is claimed to have persuaded him to burn his manuscript for the second volume

of Dead Souls. Gogol justified this by saying it was a mistake resulting from a joke played on him by “the Devil”. Gogol fell into depression , refused to eat and died of fast in 1852 at the age of forty-two.

About the play

Originally published in 1836, the play was revised for an 1842 edition.

Gogol believed that a writer should revise his work several times over a large Period of time. The ideal number of going back to the text is “eight times”. It was said that Pushkin gave Gogol the inspiration for the play over a phone call, since he had a similar experience of mistaken identity.

The play satirized bureaucracy, bribery and corruption in the governmental bodies in Russia. Corruption was even worse in small towns on the borders, since Russia’s vast lands coupled with the absence of railways made travel slow, tiring and not frequent. So this caused those remote towns (like the one in the play) to be very isolated and seldom visited by inspectors which further encouraged corruption.

At that time, Tsar Nicholas I, an autocratic emperor, was in power. He exercised strict censorship of theatre and literature, and tried to ensure that socialist and liberal ideas were not spread. He employed secret police to maintain his authority over the people.

At first the play was rejected so Gogol gave the play to one of the Tsar’s higher employees who showed it to the tsar himself. The Tsar liked it very much and ordered its production. *The Government Inspector* was first performed in 1836, and was very successful. The Tsar himself was among the audience and he later commented that the play ridiculed everyone, most of all, himself.



Commemorative plaque on his house in Rome.

“Everyone has received his due, myself most of all.” were his words.

Gogol said of the play:

“In *The Government Inspector* I resolved to gather together into one heap everything that was bad in Russia, which I was aware of at that time, all the injustices being perpetrated (committed) in those places and circumstances that especially cried out for justice, and tried to hold them all up to ridicule, at one swoop. However, as is well known, that produced a tremendous effect. Through the laughter, which I had never before vented with such force, the reader could feel my deep sorrow...”

However, the government officials and reactionary press severely criticized Gogol’s play and Gogol, being sensitive towards his work, left Russia and travelled to Europe.

During the period when the play was written, civil servants were divided into fourteen ranks in Russia, the fourteenth rank was the lowest. Many of the higher ranking people spoke French, which explains the use of many French words in the play and so reveals **Khlestakov**’s pretense to be one of the higher ranks since he uses some French words.

The play is a ‘comedy of errors’ satirizing greed, deception, hypocrisy, and extensive corruption. It is about an impoverished civil servant who is mistakenly believed to be an incognito high ranking government inspector coming from St. Petersburg. The novelty of the plot springs from the absence of love anecdotes and sympathetic characters although the latter feature was deeply censured by Gogol’s opponents.

As quoted from Nabokov, *The Government Inspector* “begins with a blinding flash of lightning and ends in a thunderclap... it is wholly placed in the tense gap between the flash and the crash.”

Gogol’s characters are dishonest, but not wholly evil so they

are not without hope. The government inspector jeopardizes their posts so they bribe the perceived threat. There is no conspiracy, no premeditated intention of doing wrong, just a preset system that is being followed. As Gogol states: “My heroes are not all villains; were I to add but one good trait to any of them, the reader would be reconciled to all of them.”

The wide social spectrum of that play, the recognizable “Russianness” of its characters, its richly colloquial language had never been heard on the Russian stage before. This caused it to be acclaimed as a realization of the dream of a national theater.

However, the brilliance of Gogol’s play lies not in its national style, but in its humanitarianism, for the play has been performed by actors and appreciated by audiences of different nationalities

Stage directions

The element of timing regarding entrances and exits of characters on stage makes up much of the humour in the play. One example is when Bobchinsky and Dobchinsky burst into the room in act one just as the Mayor says he expects the inspector to arrive any second. Another example is when Bobchinsky tumbles inside the room in the inn showing that he was eavesdropping. The dumb show at the end of the play is crucial to the effect it creates, showing the impact of the news of the identity of real government inspector on the townspeople. It also highlights that they have been caught out on all their corruption.

The Epigraph and Direct Audience Address

The play’s epigraph, taken from a Russian proverb, reads: “If your face is lopsided, don’t blame the mirror.” This saying resounds towards the end of the play, upon which the **governor**, realizing his stupid

mistake in thinking Hlestakov to be the government inspector, turns directly to the audience, asking: “What are you laughing at? You are laughing at yourselves.” As a theatrical technique, this is called “direct address,” because the actor breaks through the imaginary “fourth wall” of the stage to engage the audience directly in the world of the play. To a Russian audience of the 1830s, when the play was first performed, this line would have constituted a direct confrontation. Most audience members would have belonged to any one of fourteen official levels within the extensive Russian bureaucracy at the time. Because the play ridicules the incompetence and corruption of government officials, many critics and theatre goers were openly offended by it. Gogol’s epigraph anticipates this response, warning the spectators that, if the play, like a mirror, reflects a “lopsided” view of Russian society, it is not the play, but the society, that is to blame.

The Tableau Vivant

A “tableau vivant” is equivalent to a “freeze frame” or a “snap shot”, where the actors freeze for a minute to emphasize a reaction. Here in the play, the tableau vivant reveals the actors’ response to the news that the real government inspector has just arrived. It is in fact a “moment of truth” that sheds light on how the course of events will be. Richard Peace notes that, in this final moment, “the characters await their fate like the motionless figures of a run-down clock, whose time has suddenly run out.”

Gogol’s literary style

Gogol is considered a renowned figure of the natural school of Russian literature. He has been called “father of Russian realism.” In fact, Gogol was interested in observing real life and has perceived the need for greater realism on Russian stage to counteract the ridicule and