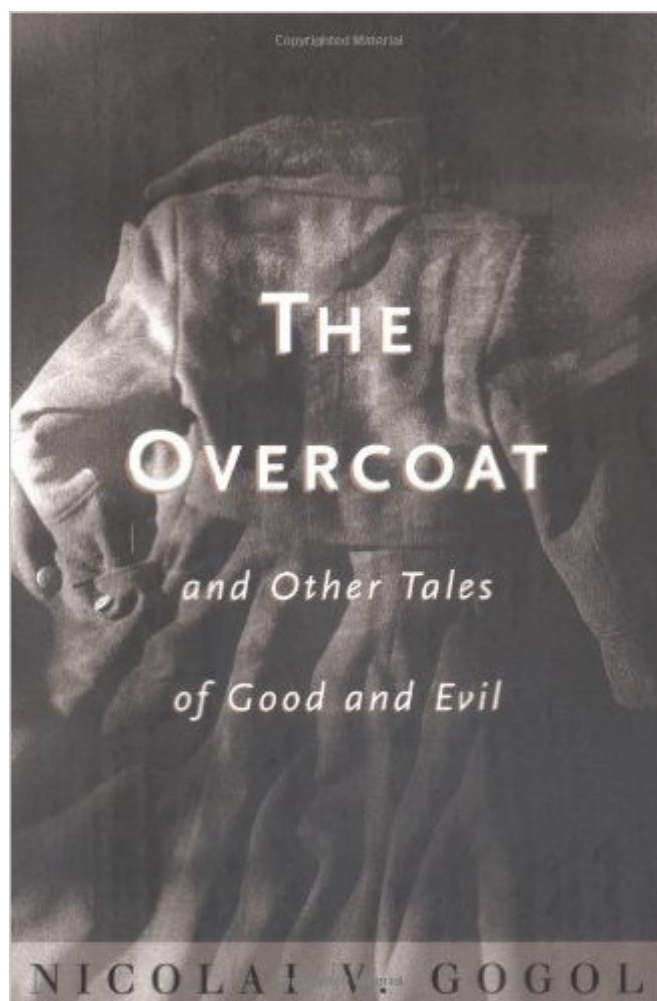


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The Overcoat And Other Tales Of Good And Evil



Synopsis

With the publication of "The Overcoat" in 1842, Nicolai Gogol (1809–1852) inaugurated a new chapter in Russian literature, in which the underdog and social misfit is treated not as a figure of fun or an object of charity, but as a human being with as much right to happiness as anybody else. The compassion, simplicity, and gentle humor with which he treats the poignant quest of a hapless civil servant for the return of his stolen overcoat—and the fantastic yet realistic manner in which he takes revenge on his nemesis, the Very Important Person—mark "The Overcoat" as one of the greatest achievements of Gogol's genius. The five other "Tales of Good and Evil" in this superb collection demonstrate the broad range of Gogol's literary palette in his short fiction: the fantastic, supernaturally tinged "The Terrible Vengeance," the comic portraiture of "Ivan Fyodorovich Shponka and His Aunt," the tragic moral realism of "The Portrait" and "Nevsky Avenue," and the rampaging satire and absurdism of his send-up of Russian upper-class stupidity, "The Nose." The stories offer the reader the perfect introduction to the imaginative genius of Gogol, which was to flower so triumphantly in his masterpiece, *Dead Souls*.

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Customer Reviews

Gogol's *Petersburg Tales*, the title under which these stories were ultimately collected by the author, are a perfect example of the brilliance use by the author of narration, absurdity and the fantastic. Note: the reviewer who thought Gogol's narration was "childish" is really missing the boat on Gogol's style! Very often, great short stories are a little too dense for the first-time reader to feel

sucked in, but with Gogol, I only felt that I couldn't read fast enough. His sense of humor is endearing and hits the mark. His narration is unlike anything else in world literature; I can't describe it - just try it out. And his worldview is fascinating, better than Vonnegut!

The opening story, "The Terrible Vengeance," was somewhat unfortunately placed by the editor, being a long melodrama about a woman pursued by her father's incestuous desire for her. The rest of the stories, however, prove Gogol to be a great writer. "The Overcoat," about a very poor man who saves up for a new and badly needed overcoat, is based on an anecdote someone told at a party; everyone laughed but Gogol, who found the loss of the man in the story pathetic, not laughable. His version is indeed pathetic, except for the end, which is completely different in tone. "The Nose" has one of the greatest beginnings of any story ever written: a barber comes down to breakfast, and, slicing through a loaf of bread, sees something hard and white in it. He pulls it out and --it's a nose! Gogol's gift for comedy comes out most strongly in "Ivan Fyodorovitch Shponka and His Aunt," which contains such priceless and absolutely true statements as: "He was nearly fifteen when he passed into the second form where instead of the abridged catechism and the four rules of arithmetic, he began to study the unabridged catechism, the book dealing with the duties of man, and fractions. Realising, however, that the further he progressed in his studies the more difficult they became" he quit school at the first opportunity and joined the army. The story is full of such gems. Another good one is "The Portrait," which, like Gogol himself, is not held in nearly high enough esteem; in this story, an artist named Chartkov buys a portrait of a man whose eyes seem to be living. That night, as Chartkov lays in bed, the man in the portrait steps out. From here, the level of tension steps up. The rest of the story traces both the nature of the portrait and the change in Chartkov, as well as offering Gogol's take on how to be an artist; more than talent and practise is involved. These, and all the other stories, are related in Gogol's best style, excellently translated by David Magarshack. Gogol writes easily, in a colloquial, slangy style, with an good eye for people's mannerisms and foibles; in these respects, he is like Dickens, with whom he is often compared. Gogol is not nearly as much of an optimist, however. None of these stories is heartwarming or ends happily; Gogol depicts the less charming parts of life, and in depicting them, makes them sometimes charming, sometimes amusing, and always interesting.

This story, one of Gogol's most famous is skillfully narrated to reflect the author's frustration with civil service and the plight of the poor, and will evoke an emotional response among listeners. Akakii Akakievich is a lowly government clerk. When winter begins he notices that his old overcoat is

beyod repairing. He manages to save money for a new, luxurious coat. His colleagues at the office arrange a party for his acquisition. But his happiness proves to be short-lived. On the way home he is attaced by thieves and robbed of his coat. To recover his lost possession, Akakievich asks help from an Important Person, a director of a department with the rank of general. He treats Akakievich harshly and Akakievich dies of fright within three days. One night when the Important Person is rerutning home, he is attacked by a ghost, late Akakii Akakievich, who steals his overcoat. The stealing of outer garments continue, even though now the ghost is a big man with a moustache and enormous fists. A simpler, if perhaps more prosaic, way of restating the general thrust of the storyline would be to say that 'The Overcoat' is like a good poem. It can be endlessly annotated, interpreted, dissected, but still emerges whole and fresh, like a new morning...

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