

# Gogol's Vestmental Term "Shinel (The Overcoat)" as "Daguerreotype" of Mediocrity

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**Abstract.** In the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the theme of 'a small' man, an ordinary and inconspicuous person, appeared in the literature. Different writers described the daily unremarkable life of mediocre people in detail. Such writers as Anton Chekhov, Alexander Kuprin, Maxim Gorky, Leonid Andreyev, Fyodor Sologub, Arkady Averchenko, Konstantin Trenyov, Ivan Shmelyov, Semyon Yushkevich, etc. dwelled later on the same topic. Under the guise of criticism of philistine life, Mikhail Zoshchenko, Mikhail Bulgakov, Vladimir Voinovich continued the tradition of "the small man's menology" during the era of socialist realism. Despite numerous literary attempts to describe small men's expectations, "The Shinel (Overcoat)" by Nikolai Gogol undoubtedly is the cornerstone of those works. Fyodor Dostoyevsky stated, "We all come out from Gogol's 'Overcoat'." Literary critics are fascinated by this story because of its scale, multi-layered conception, hidden spirituality and a prophetic encoded message. Characteristics of the protagonist change from positive to completely opposite, depending on the ideological mood of the reader. The only thing that can scare any sensible person is the rebellion of a small wrathful man who becomes merciless. The offended person easily turns from a harmless creature into a scoundrel, destroying everything to achieve his ephemeral goal.

## Introduction

What could be summed up in Akaky Akakievich's curriculum vitae from the "Overcoat", imaging that it is the story of the person from beginning to end, from birth to his death. When a person is born, he needs only a piece of linen, when he dies – a shroud. Moreover, at both these moments, he does not care what he looks like. If you ask a philistine who studied at the Soviet school, what the "The Overcoat" is about, then he will answer without hesitation about the 'small man'. Why is he small – because he has a little dream? Are there any criteria to measure the dream? Is it possible to determine the individual ranking according to his dream? The surname of our protagonist Akakia Akakievich is Bashmatchkin, which is evidently derived from the word 'bashmak' (shoe). The etymology of the last name hints that people may walk all over him, as do his colleagues, constantly mocking him. For Bashmatchkin 'shinel' (overcoat) is the embodiment of his dream: "He even got used to being hungry in the evening, but he made up for it ('shinel') by treating himself, so to say, in spirit, by bearing ever in mind the idea of his future cloak». Moreover, Akaky Akakievich collecting groschen (pennies) became attached more to the material world: "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Matthew 6:21) A man is 'small' not because of his small salary, but because of his soul: the idea of an eternal overcoat conquers the idea of the eternal life. Who will agree to admit Bashmachkin's lifestyle as a model for imitation in our days? Probably no one. Is he a positive or negative

character? It is also difficult to answer with complete certainty.

## Importance of the Problem

The problem of personality education was significant at all times. Catching the moment when innocent children turn into killers, as it is described in the book 'Lord of the Flies' by William Golding is very important especially now, when the tumour of terrorism is flourishing around the world. That is why the opinions how to bring up new generation must be supremely objective in order to prevent violence and fierceness at our streets. The society must look at the problems from all possible perspectives and take into account all viewpoints in order to reach the objective agreement.

The words of Ivan Ilyin (1883-1954) written a hundred years ago about moral education sound prophetically today: "The problem of the Russian national character has not been solved yet, hitherto it hovers between the weak character and the supreme heroism. For centuries, the monastery and army, public service and family built that character. And when they succeeded in their work, there arose wonderful, majestic images of Russian ascetics, Russian warriors, Russian unmercenaries who turned the duties into alive devotion and the law into the system of heroic deeds, when freedom and discipline became a living unity" [1]. I.A. Ilyin writes about the rare unity of freedom and discipline, so necessary for a society where the so-called 'small' mediocre people feel themselves comfortable and

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peaceful. When an ordinary person cannot cope with an accidentally abnormal situation or problem, he easily turns into a tyrant or usurper. Aggressiveness, generated by internal inconvenience, leads to bitterness, heartlessness and subsequent degradation of the individuality. A mediocre person, usually an employee, is by nature encoded to perform a certain task and duty in the name of something definite and comprehensible.

## Literature Review

The description of the lowest-paid clerk's everyday life became almost the main theme of the Russian prose at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. There was the abundance of theatrical entertainments and vaudeville, which contained "verses of innocently-derisive quality over secretaries and assessors, in addition in some stories the life of minor clerks was depicted from the satirical way, due to the concepts of that time." [2]

Samson Vyrin from the short story "Stationmaster" by Alexander Pushkin is considered to be the first image of a 'small' man in the Russian literature. Nikolai Gogol continued Pushkin's tradition in the story "Shinel (The Overcoat)". According to this tradition, a 'small' man is an innocent and good-natured creature of God, who does no harm and obediently follows the rules of the society. Usually he is a middle-aged man, of low social rank, but satisfied with his destiny and status. This hero has neither outstanding abilities nor talents; moreover, he has no will power and does not need it at all, since he is not going to change anything in his life. Alexander Pushkin and Nikolai Gogol tried to prove that a mediocre person might deserve attention, compassion and support more than a romantic hero.

In addition to the common person's detailed biography in Gogol's "Shinel" (The Overcoat), there is also a very strong religious core, which constantly attracts the attention of researchers. However, different scientists could interpret the principles of hagiographic narration in diametrically opposite ways: some expose Akaky Akakievich Bashmatchkin, the main character of the story, as a hagiographic hero who gives up his ascetic feat; others impart the existential dimension to the human tragedy of the personage.

The interpretation of the Akaky Akakievich through the hagiographic traditions has recently become widespread among literary critics. In the late nineties of the last century V.E. Vetlovskaya, having scrutinized the sources of "Shinel (The Overcoat)", suggested that the name and fate of Gogol's hero could rise not only to the life of Saint Saint Acacius of Sinai (the 1<sup>st</sup> half of the 6<sup>th</sup> c.) but also martyr Akaky (late 3<sup>rd</sup> - early 4<sup>th</sup> century). Adherents of this concept emphasize the ascetic "feats" committed by Bashmatchkin for the sake of buying a new 'shinel' (overcoat) as the main arguments, and they also draw attention to the semantic symbolism of the character's name: Akaky in Greek, Ἀκάκιος (Acacius) means 'mild-mannered, doing no evil'. A Dutch literary critic F. Driessen first proposed the hypothesis of Saint Acacius of Sinai half century ago. This idea was picked up and developed by Seemann, who determined that the

main motivating source for the author's intention was the spiritual book "The Ladder of Divine Ascent" by Saint John Climacus, as the story was the part of the Gogol's reading at the time of writing "Shinel (The Overcoat)". Moreover, the comparison of the plot "Shinel (The Overcoat)" and "Ladder of Paradise" allows us to find out a certain typological similarity in the way of living and behavior of Akaky Akakievich and Saint Acacius of Sinai [3].

Italian researcher Cinzia De Lotto, who is specialized in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian literature, also establishes the identical genetic connection. She devoted several contributions on Gogol's works, mainly on the aspects of poetics and style of the writer, the problems of textual analysis, and reflections of Gogol's legacy in an intercultural dimension. In her opinion, the semiotic of the clerk's image reflects the social, civil and religious values. This image is an artistic synthesis of Gogol's exhortation to awake, because Russia is a monastery itself. Moreover, never-ending rewriting of documents is the repetitive monotonous prayer as a means of continuous communication with the inner world. The well-known Russian philosopher L.V. Karasyov also shares Cinzia De Lotto's evaluations. For him Bashmatchkin's life story is a hymn to modesty and patience, when the desire to acquire a new 'shinel' (overcoat), devilish temptation, destroys the soul of the character [4].

Thus, Akaky Akakievich is the representation of a monk who follows all the rules of asceticism for the sake of asceticism itself. As a result, he gradually passes from service in the high sense of this word to being a slave of the evil spirit, presented by Petrovich, the symbol the snake-tempter. Petrovich showed the pure soul of Bashmatchkin "two benefits: one thing that is warm and the other that is good". The clerk, according to the work of S.G. Bocharov "Cold, shame and freedom (The History of literature sub specie of the Holy History)" does not resist the temptation to the new vestment.

Unlike Cinzia De Lotto, contemporary literary critics of the Orthodox orientation expressed the diametrically opposite view of the connection between Akaky Akakievich's life and his spiritual world. For instance, V. V. Vinogradov, based on the writer's judgments about the true meaning of the civil service, believes that the official work, the daily rewriting of papers by the protagonist, is practically his religious service that brings him spiritual comfort. S. A. Goncharov, identifying Akaky Akakievich as 'the man of God', also draws attention to the "transcendental nature of the ordinary occupation and service of the hero" through "the prism of Christian values and Christian aesthetics". S. I. Mashinsky compares Bashmatchkin's devotion and loyalty to his work with austerity: "the stupid work of the paper scribe paralyzed in him the slightest manifestation of spirituality" [5].

## Discussion

As known, in literature the image of a small man is composed of a triad: "public – personal – authorial", where 'public' is the position of the character in the society, usually his lower rank. 'Personal' is the inability

of a mediocre person to change anything in his life. As a rule, the rebellion of a 'small' man always has the effect of a damaging boomerang: the main character goes mad or into a binge, or falls ill and dies quietly and unnoticeable. Only the authors' attitude towards the 'small' people, which can be understood through the description of the details, differentiate these images in the literature.

For example, Alexander Pushkin is sympathetic to a small man in "The Tales of the Late Ivan Petrovich Belkin", where a tragic episode from the life of a lonely old man who lost his only daughter is shown. Fyodor Dostoevsky insists on respect for the 'small' man, revealing the spiritual wealth of titular counselor Makar Devushkin, in the story "Poor Folk". Devushkin tries to uphold the right to be recognized as a person by all other people [6].

Anton Chekhov develops quite the opposite theme of the 'small' man. The writer, through the irony over clerks' nature, shows his disdain for the slavish psychology of a 'small' man, while criticizing the "littleness and shallowness of his soul" [7]. Anton Chekhov thus, as it may seem, distances himself from the humanistic traditions of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russian literature.

For a long time for the sake of the ruling socialist system Nikolai Gogol, being a victim of a superficial interpretation, was introduced as a satirist and castigator of the czarist regime. Due to this the book has survived for a century in the Russian schools. Caused by the ideology, the religious and moral aspects of Gogol's books were ignored: the interminable quest for justice, truth and God in a mundane, earthly life, which led to the writer's dramatic exodus. For decades, the critics have brought up a careless, frivolous reader, which easily understands who is right and who is to blame from the first pages of any book. The world of this reader usually consists of black and white, good and bad, without tinges, nuances and attempts to understand who disagrees with you now. According to this interpretation, a poor titular counselor from St. Petersburg is a representative of petty people who are excluded from being an example to follow.

Many theorists of literature criticize him for not being talkative, because it is the main difference between a human and an animal. Human is a creature of Logos. But Akaky Akakievich is a nonverbal creature: "expressed himself chiefly by prepositions, adverbs, and scraps of phrases which had no meaning whatever". He was unable to create just copy: "one director ... ordered him to be given something more important than mere copying. ... This caused him so much toil that he broke into a perspiration, rubbed his forehead, and finally said, "No, give me rather something to copy." He imitates the form, but cannot comprehend the content. Whereas now we have the 'copy-paste' generation of scientists, not to speak of common mortals, when rather few people are capable to create something new by themselves. And it is surprisingly hilarious, it does not look so dangerous in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when everybody without any remorse is so busy with plagiarism, leading to a universal zombie society. At the time of Gogol's appeal to the image of "homo scripturam" there was desacralization of the idea

of writing in the space of the European culture, as well as the Russian one. Gradually this process might gain momentum until at the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> century; 'homo scripturam' is not completely replaced by 'homo computerus'.

Any piece of art must be considered in the context of its time. Every writer puts pen to paper, referring allegorically to his contemporaries, since he knows them better but not us. The novelist tries to convey the idea that is relevant at the time of writing the manuscript. The author does not ponder in advance about the potential multilayer features and abundance of symbols in order to fit the future literary critics.

Let us consider some details of the story from the view of Gogol's contemporary. For instance, the title of the story is "Shinel (The Overcoat)". Formal military uniform (or civil apparel) of the special cut with a fold on the back and strap was officially initiated instead of the cloak by the decree of Paul I in the Russian army in 1799. The word 'shinel' (overcoat) is borrowed from French, which was familiar for the majority of the educated people at that time. Hypothetically it is derived from the '*chenil*' – "dog kennel" or from '*chenille*' – "caterpillar". R.M. Kirsanova suggests that the occurrence of the word was motivated by '*chenil*' "dog kennel" since the 'shinel' (overcoat) was a kind of home for the military: it could be used both as a blanket and as a raincoat-camping tent [8]. It should be admitted that this etymological meaning is more appropriate for Gogol's 'shinel' (overcoat).

Conversely, if we assume that the origin of the word is connected with the meaning of "*caterpillar*", then we come across Gogol's phantasmagoria of things: the caterpillar is the future butterfly. "In Christian art, the butterfly is a symbol of the resurrected human soul. ... The life-cycle of the caterpillar, chrysalis and butterfly symbolizes life, death and resurrection" [9]. Stephen King, American author, wrote an apocalyptic horror novel "Cell" (2006). The title of the book combines all essential meanings of the word '*cell*': 1) the basic structural unit of all organisms; 2) cell phone; 3) a small group acting as a unit within a larger organization; 4) a convent or prison. Maybe the writer implies, when organisms, human beings, are given cell phones, they are able to combine into small groups, and at the same time, they lose their identity and freedom. In fact, a person with the cell phone is absolutely restricted, because he has to obey the orders coming from the phone in the form of messages and various news. People panic when they forget or lose their androids. The phone model determines casteism in the modern society. If Stephen King so successfully chose the title for his work then Nikolai Gogol might also use the paronomasia of '*chenil*' and '*chenille*', bringing together all the etymological meanings of the word 'shinel' (overcoat). At that time, there were other terms of clothing, but he preferred 'shinel' (overcoat).

Developing this idea, specifically, the meaning of "*caterpillar*", one should remember the film "I Am Legend" (2007), based on the science fiction horror novel of the same name by Richard Matheson. When in the course of the lab attack, the male-zombie makes a butterfly-shaped smear on the glass door, Neville (Will Smith), the hero of the film, understands it is identifying

the female, which he was experimenting on by her butterfly tattoo. At the same time, he recollects his daughter, talking about the butterfly before her death. Neville realizes he has created “an antidote” against being a zombie that can help people to recover and he shouts: “Let me save you! I can save you all!”, but nobody listens to him, because people usually even prefer not to listen to Sermon on the Mount. Zombies symbolize healthy people, who will never suffer from cancer, but who have lost their souls and uniqueness. Could we imagine that Akaky Akakievich is a kind of zombie, living like a caterpillar, who only needs a tiny room in order not to freeze?

Another twist of fate possibly will surprise the reader; Nikolai Gogol mentions the exact birth date of Bashmatchkin: “Akakiy Akakievich was born, if my memory fails me not, in the evening of the 23<sup>rd</sup> of March”. Exactly on the same day of 1801, the funeral of the emperor Paul I took place in the Peter and Paul Fortress. One of many mystical coincidences, which we meet in Gogol’s books. To draw parallels between Akaki Akakievich and Paul I of Russia is very doubtful, but in spite of everything, dates are the same.

Exaggeratedly in this case, some would like to recollect the ‘small man syndrome’ or ‘Napoleon complex’. Nevertheless, the story under discussion is neither about ‘small man syndrome’, nor ‘about ‘Napoleon complex’ because they both could be characterized by the overly aggressive or domineering social behaviour. Our Akakiy Akakievich became belligerent only after his passing away, having turned into the ghost: “A rumour suddenly spread through St. Petersburg that a dead man ... dragged, without regard to rank or calling, every one’s cloak from his shoulders, ... every sort of fur and skin which men adopted for their covering. One of the department officials saw the dead man with his own eyes and immediately recognised in him Akakiy Akakievich”. Bashmatchkin was characterized by meekness and humbleness, therefore he fully corresponded to his name “harmless” in the superlative degree, as the name is doubled (Akakiy Akakievich): “... amid all these annoyances he never made a single mistake in a letter. But if the joking became wholly unbearable, as when they jogged his hand and prevented his attending to his work, he would exclaim, “Leave me alone! Why do you insult me?”... In these moving words, other words resounded – “I am thy brother.” Where the last sentence is the echo of Christian motifs of patience and obedience. Nikolai Gogol justifies and sympathizes with his ‘a perpetual titular councillor’.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the pictures invented by Louis Daguerre daguerreotype became very popular. They, generally saved under glass, appeared either positive or negative, depending on the angle at which it was viewed and whether a light or dark background was being reflected in the metal. There are numerous contradictory opinions about Akakiy Akakievich. For somebody, he is an absolute holiness for that reason he is associated with the saints, for some literary critics he is just a mediocre person. That is to say, such a peculiar daguerreotype, depending on the angle of the view and light, which are in most cases artificial: “don’t trust everything you see even

salt looks like sugar”. The obsession with work might be understood as servility to the authorities: “It would be difficult to find another man who lived so entirely for his duties. It is not enough to say that Akakiy laboured with zeal: no, he laboured with love”. The frugality could be considered as stinginess and ungenerousness. Without a doubt, sometimes his asceticism turns into absurdity. During the careful reading and counting, it can be found out that, he does not need to starve the whole year, as he planned in order to save up on ‘shinel’ (overcoat). Asceticism is for the sake of asceticism instead of faith. The deeds of the personage are lack of reasonable goal-setting, like the acts of people who hold fasting for the sake of losing weight, and not for the sake of purifying the soul.

Our hero is ready to make sacrifices to buy new garments. The religious motif of the ascetic hardship is the realization of a more general idea of temptation, which goes back accurately to the biblical scripture. In the theological texts, clothing is mentioned as a luxury item, sometimes alongside with gold and silver. The desire to buy a ‘shinel’ (overcoat) can be treated not as an obsession with a new extravagant thing, explicitly as a violation of the evangelical commandment [3].

The ‘Shinel’ (overcoat) is a symbolic element with an interesting ontology. Clothing is a semiotic system, a special language, a statement, heard before the speech of a person. The Old Believers regarded clothing as a shadow of a man, his amulet. A naked man is defenseless, both physically and morally. So is it so bad that Bashmatchkin vanishes in the desire to dress up and subsequently join the world of his colleagues? The connection between the character and his clothes is very real and meaningful. Nikolai Gogol primary focuses on a person and all the little things that are somehow connected with him. “Gogol really believes that the difference in the intensity of the coat colour is worthy of deep meditation, since it is a characteristic detail of person’s external appearance, and therefore, it was not accidental, but in a strong relationship with the personality of the owner of a frock coat” [10].

While Bashmatchkin wore his wrapper, this dilapidated but vital thing protected his life. The new ‘shinel’ (overcoat) from the very beginning was fraught with a potential threat [4]. Continuing to justify the clerk, you can look at his surname from another angle: “his family name was Bashmatchkin. This name is evidently derived from ‘bashmak’ (shoe); but when, at what time, and in what manner, is not known. His father and grandfather, and all the Bashmatchkins, always wore boots, which only had new heels two or three times a year”. It turns out that all his ancestors walked in boots hence they existed wherever the impassibility of roads reigned. Therefore, our personage made a career in the capital unlike his parents.

Maybe it is just a myth of critics about a ‘small’ man. Akaky Akakievich dies from human cruelty and indifference. In the beginning, he tries to live according to the commandments. The person like Akaky should not be disturbed by anyone. None of the people can live without faith: everyone needs some kind of hope. If a small person is deprived of faith, he begins to look for its replacement.

The problem is what he will find. It may be just a 'shinel' (overcoat), or it could be either a sect or a religious bigoted movement misinterpreting and presenting the reflection of the truth in the favourable subjective light. At the last phase, many daguerreotype pictures were painted in colours that did not correspond to reality. The portraits became more beautiful, but not more truthful.

In the long run, person himself chooses to remain 'small' and 'invisible' as Makar Devushkin ("Poor Folk") does: "Sometimes a man will hide himself away, and not show his face abroad, for the mere reason that, though he has done nothing to be ashamed of, he dreads the gossip and slandering, which are everywhere to be encountered. If his civic and family life have to do with literature, everything will be printed and read and laughed over and discussed; until at length, he hardly dare show his face in the street at all, seeing that he will have been described by report as recognizable through his gait alone! Then, when he has amended his ways, and grown gentler ..., he will come to be accounted a virtuous, decent citizen who has deserved well of his comrades, rendered obedience to his superiors, wished no one any evil, preserved the fear of God in his heart, and died lamented" [2]. Maybe there is no need for everyone to be a romantic Danko. Egyptian pyramids were built not by pharaohs themselves, but by their servants. A victorious army needs a talented commander and many anonymous soldiers. It is impossible to win a war with dozens of generals and one soldier.

Robert Rozhdestvensky, a Soviet poet, wrote the 'remake' of "a small man's life":

There was once a tiny man on the mercilessly small Earth.

He had a small bag and did a little job with small salary

One beautiful morning on his small window

Knocked a seemingly small war

He was given a small gun and small boots

He was given a helmet and a shinel of the small size

When he fell dead unfairly, gracelessly

With his mouth twisted from scream,

The whole world was off the marble to shape him in his life-size.

The bitterness of the loss of a 'small' man, together with an absolutely positive image, is saved in Bulat Okudzhava's song "Take your shinel, let's go home": "The war has bent and worn us down / yet even war has met an end./ Four years your mother has no son, Take your shinel, let's go home!"

## Conclusion

No matter how long we discuss about the intention and conception of Nikolai Gogol, we always fail to understand him. All the time there will be new controversial details. The main thing is not the awareness of historical authenticity, but the feelings generated by the piece of work.

Like an engraving print or a negative photograph, we can get subsequent endless copies, or speaking in the modern language 'remakes' of the piece of work with a

well-thought out plot, for instance, Chekhov's story "The Death of a Government Clerk", Kuraev's novel "Captain Dickstein", Bogaev's play "Bashmatchkin". Moreover, in every new variation there will be negative or positive attitude of the author to the mediocre character, either the protagonist Firsov from the dark novel "The Thief" by Leonid Leonov or Cincinnatus C. from "Invitation to a Beheading" by Vladimir Nabokov.

Nikolai Gogol warns us of the potential destructive power of the evil of a mediocre person who can fiercely drag overcoats from the shoulders of pedestrians. Once again, Nikolai Gogol appears as a visionary, anticipating the October Revolution, which caused bloody reprisals, the collapse of the Russian Empire and the loss of Christianity for a long time.

He seems to tell us that weak people are taking very harmful revenge, so it would be better not to offend them. Moreover, it is necessary to create comfortable conditions for their modest innocent life: "Thus flowed on the peaceful life of the man, ...; and thus it would have continued to flow on, perhaps, to extreme old age, were it not that there are various ills strewn along the path of life for titular councilors". If an ordinary person needs 'shinel' (overcoat) and the chance to copy something in order to be happy, then he should be given this opportunity. In reality, many people have small dreams. However, when they are severely hindered from realizing them, big dreams and ambitions, much more dangerous than the previous ones, may appear. If only Adolf Hitler had not been rejected by The Academy of Fine Arts Vienna and had become an ordinary artist, and Vladimir Lenin had not been expelled from Kazan Imperial University and had become a common lawyer, there could not have been terrible bloodshed throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

It should be noted that in Russia there were constant unnatural, non-evolutionary reforms (economic, political, general cultural), often infiltrated from above, in which a 'small' person was always exposed to stresses that he could not cope with and from which he was becoming wild. Like his legendary prototype from "The Ladder of Divine Ascent" by Saint John Climacus, "the doer of obedience" Akaky Bashmatchkin did not die ultimately, but unlike Saint Acacius, who appeared obedience even after death, Akaky departs from duty and turns into a real demon robber.

The long-term prejudiced explanation of the story "The Shinel (Overcoat)", reduced only to the social context, impoverished the essence of Gogol's text. Whereas the story simultaneously harmonizes various motifs: Christian-hagiographic, social and ethical. All these motifs, forming a multi-layered text, are equally essential for the understanding of Gogol's books. At the same time, they create numerous variations, which allow interpreting the literary masterpiece from opposite points of view in different ways.

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