The Desouling of Akaky Akakievich in Nikolai Gogol's "The Overcoat"

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Originally published in St. Petersburg, Russia in 1842 under the harsh, despotic rule of Nicolas I, Nikolai Gogol's short story, "The Overcoat," exposes the socioeconomic climate of Russia at that time and the dangers of hierarchical systems. The characters' behaviors and interactions give vent to the malevolence inherent in the dominant ideology, which values materialism and denigrates humanity. The power structure and ideology of the main character's Akaky Akakievich's, work environment reflects the class hierarchy and crass ideology of his social environment. The inhumanity of the ideology and the disparity of power in the bureaucratic structure of Akaky's political, economic, and social world limit the qualities that make him human, namely his health, freedom, consciousness, and spirit.

Akaky, caught in a vicious cycle, suffers as a member of the lower class in a bureaucratic system that encourages inequality by means of its hierarchical structure. Within this hierarchical system, the bourgeoisie devalue humans and view them merely as social tools worth only as much as their exchange values. For their own benefit, the bourgeoisie use the bureaucratic system to dehumanize Akaky by turning him into a machine, which makes them rich but desensitizes Akaky. This desensitization restricts his consciousness and, as a result, makes it easier for the bourgeoisie to exploit him. Indeed, Akaky's lack of awareness culminates in his blind acceptance of his own exploitation. Akaky does stumble into social mobility, but only by way of physical need rather than conscious thought; and, as befits a materialistic society, he (and others) realize his human worth only after his material condition improves.

The inhumanity and exploitation that Akaky suffers from emanated from the hierarchy and bureaucracy that dominated the social order of 19th Century Russia. The emperor at this time, Nicholas I, "strengthened and centralized bureaucratic structures to an unprecedented degree" ("Nicholas I") and "decreed there was to be no social mobility" ("Nicholas the Cop"). From the story's beginning, the narrator presents Akaky, a victim of this oppressive social system, as bound to the proletariat class. The permanence of Akaky's social position evidences itself through his role as "perpetual titular councilor" (390, my italics) where "he was always to be seen in the same place, in the same position, the same occupation–always the same copy clerk–and it was rumored he was born in his daily uniform" (391). His "daily uniform was not green but a rusty red color" (392), which implies his social position's inertness and stagnation rather than its change and growth. The fact that Akaky's father occupied the same position before him enhances the scope and magnitude of this social immobility. The determinism of his social class intensifies with the portrayal of his birth, during which his mother declares "it is clearly fate...His father's name was Akaky, so let his son's name be Akaky too" (391). The narrator then states that "the child [Akaky]...howled and made a face, as though he foresaw that his destiny was to be a titular councilor" (391). Akaky's inheritance of his job, social position, and his name from his father exemplifies the social determinism of the period, which worked to seal "his destiny" (391).

Akaky's powerlessness over his social position extends into his work environment. Those of Akaky's rank are "a type whom some writers commonly ridicule... for [they] are fond of attacking those who cannot fight back" (390). Akaky's inability to defend himself signifies his social impotence: a trait shared
among the proletariat. His ineffectuality becomes evident through the way other characters perceive him. The narrator states that "[n]o respect was shown to him in the department. The porter not only did not rise from his chair when he came in, but never even glanced at him, as if only a fly had buzzed through the anteroom. His superiors treated him with cool superciliousness" (391). The comparison of Akaky's presence with something as insignificant as a fly simultaneously shows him to be dehumanized and perceived as unimportant and meaningless.

Akaky's apparent insignificance hinges on the further dehumanization of him as a machine: "Some assistant chief would thrust a piece of paper in front of him...And he took it, looking only at the paper, not observing who handed it to him or whether he had the right to do so; he simply took it and started copying it" (391). His limited awareness and automation smacks of mechanical procession and presents him not as a human but rather as a dehumanized, repetitive machine that produces copies and does nothing else. Akaky's superiors, and the bourgeoisie in general, value Akaky only in terms of labor and his machine-like production, rather than his individual personality. Because Akaky's superiors esteem only his exchange value rather than his human value, Akaky's perception of himself is limited to that of a machine whose value, contingent only on its production, is determined by others.

The narrator emphasizes Akaky's limited consciousness by stating, "[o]utside of [Akaky's] copying...nothing else existed for him. He paid no attention to his clothes," and he "never paid any attention whatsoever to what was going on in the streets" (392). He was usually not aware that "he was not in the middle of a line of copying but in the middle of the street" (392). At home he would eat his soup with no sense of awareness and "never even noticing the taste—[he] ate it all with flies and anything else the Lord dropped into it" (392). Akaky's dull sense of taste further evidences his desensitization. This desensitization hinges on his dehumanization and results in his lack of awareness—all of which is caused by the hierarchical structure of his socioeconomic environment.

Akaky's dehumanization and lack of awareness culminate in his alienation from his fellow employees—who, in turn, regard him with hostility and malevolence. This inhumanity in the workplace manifests itself when "the young clerks laughed at [Akaky] and made fun of him, as much as their bureaucratic sense of humor was capable of..." (391). The fact that their work structure limits their sense of humor—a distinct human quality—testifies to the dehumanizing effect that their surroundings has on their consciousness. Moreover, Akaky's consciousness is limited strictly to his work; although he is "laughed at," (391) and "made fun of as much as [possible]" (391), "he never answered them and acted as if they did not exist" (390).

Akaky, alienated from human relations, thus focuses all of his attentions on producing copies. Consequently, Akaky becomes desensitized to all things but his work. Indeed, the teasing only becomes "totally unbearable when...they nudged his elbow and kept him from getting his work done" (391), and then Akaky "would cry out, 'Leave me alone! Why do you torment me?'' (391). Since Akaky takes nothing personally until it affects his work, the story implies that his perceived self-identity is limited to that of a machine or his work. After Akaky cries out for peace, one of the young clerks, still new enough to retain his empathy, recognizes the inherent malevolence in this teasing:

there was something strange in his words and the voice that uttered them. There was in it something that stirred compassion, so much that one clerk who had taken his cue from the others and had joined the fun, suddenly stopped short as though everything had been transformed before his eyes, and presented itself in a brand new light. Some unseen force repelled him from the co-workers whose acquaintance he had so wished to make...

[The young man would] long after this, in his happiest moments [remember Akaky's words and] in these sharp words other words echoed: I am your brother. [This revealed to him] how much inhumanity there is in man. (391)

The young clerk's realization possibly parallels the feelings evoked in the reader by the text, thereby raising the reader's consciousness along with the clerk's. In this passage, the adjective strange is used to describe words that evoke compassion; this adjective implies that compassion is a strange feeling for the bureaucrats who, like Akaky, are desensitized by their environment. The bureaucrats' cold heartedness emerges again as

They "showered scraps of paper on his head calling them snowflakes" (391).

The cold heartedness of the despotic government and its harsh bureaucracy metonymically intensifies due to the setting—the
biting cold climate of St. Petersburg—described as:

a powerful enemy of all who [like Akaky] live, more or less, on less than 400 rubles a year...At nine o'clock in the morning, at the very hour when the streets are full of men headed for their departments, it begins to give such potent and piercing nips to all noses impartially that the poor clerks do not know what to do about it. (393)

Akaky, like the rest of the poor clerks, has to shudder through the shivering cold in his threadbare overcoat, which "had become as thin as mosquito-netting; the cloth was worn to such a degree that he could see through it, and the lining was fallen to pieces" (394). His co-workers view the overcoat—like they view Akaky—as "an object of ridicule...they even deprived it of the noble name of overcoat and called it "the peignoir"" (394). The frailty and impotence of Akaky's overcoat parallels his own social insignificance and powerlessness; it seems that, through the eyes of others, his value as a human being equals the material value of his evanescent overcoat.

The deterioration of Akaky's overcoat led to "his back and shoulders suffer[ing] particularly badly" (394) from the brutal cold, and he then "saw that it was impossible to get along without a new overcoat, and his spirits sank completely. How could he do it? Where would the money come from?" (397). Akaky had no money to spare; he "needed new trousers and had to pay a long overdue bill to his shoemaker for putting new tops on his old boots...in a word, all his money was accounted for in advance" (397). The new overcoat he needs is out of his price range, and even if he works harder there is no chance of gaining a raise for "if his salary had been equal to his zeal, he might...find himself a councilor of state. But his only reward...was a button in his buttonhole [instead of a medal] and hemorrhoids where he sat" (392). Akaky's unjust pay keeps him in a position of need; as a result, he remains perpetually bound to his social class because he hardly makes enough money to survive, let alone move up in rank. In order to purchase an overcoat, Akaky starves himself for months, sacrifices other substantial requirements, and gathers his entire life savings (only forty rubles); eventually, the purchase of the overcoat becomes Akaky's reason to live; it made:

[h]is life...be[come] in many ways fuller, as if he were a married man or as if some other man lived inside him—as if he were no longer alone and some charming companion had agreed to walk the path of life with him—and that friend was none other than the overcoat...He became livelier, and his character even became stronger, like that of a man who made up his mind and set himself some goal. (398)

To say the overcoat gave Akaky's life meaning and hope is not an overstatement, for it is "the most glorious day of Akaky Akakievich's life" when "[the tailor] finally deliver[s] the overcoat" (399). Because he possesses a new overcoat Akaky values himself and the world more; also, to the same proportion that Akaky was devalued and dehumanized, the overcoat is valued and humanized as a "charming companion" (398) and a "friend" (398), which in turn, reflects the values of a materialistic society.

Not only does Akaky see himself as a better person because of his new overcoat—so do his co-workers who previously derided him. Now instead of ridiculing him, "[t]hey began to congratulate him and to say pleasant things to him, so many that he...grew embarrassed" (400). Akaky, who before he bought his new overcoat "was not tempted by any diversions" (393), and who had "[n]ever been seen at any sort of evening party" (393) was now invited to a party, thrown to honor his new overcoat (rather than him). When Akaky arrives at the party, everyone "went out at once...to take another look at his overcoat. Akaky Akakievich...could not help but feel pleased when he saw how much they praised his overcoat" (401). Although Akaky's co-workers treat him more as a human being, it is only because of his increased sign-exchange, or material-status, value. In fact, his sign-exchange value is directly proportional to his perceived human worth.

Throughout the story, Akaky's human worth equals the sign-exchange value of his material possessions and/or his exchange value as a laborer. Rather than valuing his human qualities of personality and individuality, the bourgeoisie strip him of his human characteristics by dehumanizing him. The bureaucratic ideology supports the hierarchical socioeconomic system by encouraging inequality, which in turn gives way to a socioeconomic system wherein the proletariat are dehumanized and turned into machines for the benefit of the bourgeoisie. In this classist system, the crass materialist ideology justifies the commodification and exploitation of human beings like Akaky. By exposing the injustice and malevolence
inherent in such a system, the text evokes—one could hope—compassion for Akaky (and those like him) in the reader; as a result, the text raises its readers' consciousness and begs their critique of such an inhumane ideology and the oppressive system it supports.

Works Cited

