

Title: The “Ridiculous Jew” in Gogol, Dostoevsky and Cankar

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Abstract:

In Slavic literature one encounters well-known but comical depictions of Jews in Gogol's *Taras Bulba* (1835), Dostoevsky's *Notes from a Dead House* (1862) and Ivan Cankar's "The Innkeeper Elijah" (1911). *Taras Bulba* includes Yankel, a wily, unpredictable and, above all, comic character. Dostoevsky, meanwhile, refers to Gogol's Yankel in his autobiographical *Notes from a Dead House* in describing Isai Fomich Bumstein, a Jewish fellow prisoner from his time in Siberia (1850–1854). Dostoevsky describes the odd man as he carries out his religious rituals, but also in his obsession with the bathhouse. "Lord, what a hilarious and droll man he was!" recalls Dostoevsky. Among Slovenian writers, Cankar devoted much attention to Jews (1876–1918); in his depictions he leaned greatly on Gogol, Dostoevsky and others. In the short story "The Innkeeper Elijah" (1911), for example, Cankar depicts the crafty and comic Elijah as a metaphor for foreigners who want to steal Slovenian land.

This comparative analysis shows that all three writers use Jewish stereotypes, each adapting them to his specific historical and cultural situation. Irony is a common denominator: Gogol juxtaposes the passionate, battle-hungry Cossacks who feel no attachment to possessions and the greedy Jewish merchant. Dostoevsky highlights the contrast between Christians and Muslims and the comically-portrayed religious Jew. Cankar focuses most on the contrast between the miserly innkeeper Elijah and the prodigal ways of his "queen" Isis. This paper has three main objectives: to identify the specific cultural, economic and religious circumstances that gave rise to such images of Jews; to examine the literary techniques used to highlight the contrast between the Jewish characters and the majority population; to assess the relationship between historical reality and literary fiction. In this way, the paper considers the degree to which these writers can be assumed to have anti-Semitic tendencies.