

Title: *Како сделан Акакий: Letter as Hero in Шинель*
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Recent scholars have construed Gogol's "Overcoat," along with its hero Akakii Akakievich, as pure literary performance. Popkin represents the inarticulate copy-clerk as "little more than a verbal artifact," while Bernheimer describes Akakii as "a text [...] that can be deciphered not as a series of significant signs but only as a succession of discrete letters." This paper will pursue a very literal extension of this line of critical investigation, presenting Akakii as an individual alphabetic character in search of context, difference and, ultimately, meaning.

The 1820s and 1830s in Russia witnessed a marked revival of concern with the form and significance of the alphabet. During these years, orthographic issues were widely reported in the press and debated in scholarly circles. The old tradition of anthropomorphic alphabets, which had several well-known precedents in the 18th century, underwent a simultaneous renaissance in the years just preceding Gogol's composition of "Overcoat." Indeed, according to Vaiskopf, the period in question saw a rebirth of a playful tradition allegorically associating the letters of the alphabet with the Russian bureaucratic hierarchy. Gogol would undoubtedly have been familiar with the issues and polemics surrounding the alphabet, and with the proliferation of literary responses to the orthographic question.

The text of Gogol's "Overcoat" incorporates numerous hints about Akakii's familiar relationship with letters: he copies them lovingly, winks and laughs at his favorites, and sees them superimposed on the outer world. Earlier drafts of the story include the names of specific old Cyrillic letters, unambiguously suggesting their embodiment in the story's hero. Akakii's obsession with letters extends only as far as their form, however; unable to wield words to create meaning, he is interested solely in their outward shape and reproduction, rather than their content. This paper will explore "Overcoat" as Gogol's unique literary transformation of the alphabet question, in which Akakii represents a solitary, unsignifying signifier.

References:

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