The works of Shakespeare had a profound and lasting influence upon the Russian Romantics and, specifically, on Gogol, shaping his literary genius, style, and devices. Gogol explicitly alludes to Shakespeare in one of his drafts of *Dead Souls*. He mentions the portrait of the playwright hanging on his wall and lauds Shakespeare’s ability to properly reveal “nature as it was” (Fanger, 12). In “On the Theater” (Gogol, 1969, 75) Gogol references Shakespeare’s art and his trenchant ability to satirize, ridicule hypocrisy, mock bureaucracy, and reveal other mystical improprieties that taint society. He also reveals his opinion of the artist’s role—to freely expose man’s true soul and inveterate nature without the constraint of some crass political agenda. He believed that “… an oft repeated dramatic composition, that is, one of those truly classic plays in which our attention is focused upon the nature and soul of a man, necessarily begins to solidify the principals of society, insensibly compels our dispositions to stability, while all those plays flooded with emptiness and lightness…makes society light and frivolous” (Gogol, 1969, 75). Gogol’s personal purpose as an artist could have been to depict the darkest, basest, and utterly prosaic parts of human existence and meaningfully transform them into something august and insightful. Principally, Gogol seems to have gleaned from Shakespeare the basic poetic elements that can transform a bland and banal historical work into something unexpectedly visionary and beautiful (Fanger, 60).

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1 And even the way in which he wore his hair.
In his play *The Inspector General* Gogol utilizes the classic Latin elements of Shakespeare’s *Comedy of Errors*. From the very onset of the play, he draws heavily upon the idea that comedy is dictated by a rapid pace with events progressing and spiraling out of control quickly.\(^2\) Other themes include mistaken identity, situational absurdity, objects as plot devices, and a revelatory masking and un-masking of characters’ true motivations and underlying insecurities. The most apparent and striking commonality between *The Inspector General* and *Comedy of Errors*, however, is a doubling or double layering of elements within the texts of the plays to create comedy, to progress the plot forward, and to send a profound and tacit message. By doubling I mean a tragic sameness in which everyone thinks, looks, and acts the same. More specific examples include strikingly similar characters or doubles, the dual or paradoxical personalities of officials, dual identities (one character perceived as someone else), puns and words with double meanings, and double layers of rhetoric. This comparative analysis will shed light on the meaning of the doubling device and demonstrate the commitment of both writers in their respective plays to focusing upon higher and lasting truths that reveal the complexity and profundity of human nature. For Gogol, however, I will analyze his journey as a writer with a view toward understanding why his desire to write a social satire ultimately led him to write not comedy or tragic-comedy but something altogether metaphysical, dream-like, a bit absurd, and aimed at establishing his artistic legacy.

Shakespeare’s artistic legacy is clearly evident from the opening act of Gogol’s play. In *A Comedy of Errors*, the existence of two sets of twins or doubles serves as a springboard for the action after the first several pages, in which Solinus, Duke of Ephesus, pronounces that Egeon, a merchant of Syracuse, will be sentenced to death. Suddenly, Shakespeare’s audience becomes

\(^2\) Lecture 10.20.08, Professor Amelia Glaser
aware of Egeon’s impending doom. Similarly, in *The Inspector General* the audience becomes immediately aware of the impending arrival of the real Inspector General. In Shakespeare’s comedy, the rapid introduction of an underlying foreboding tone adumbrates the entrance of the two sets of genetically related twins. Farce ensues. Gogol’s humor also depends on bizarre coincidences. Eikhenbaum has written that Gogol’s “…plots are always skimpy or, in fact, nonexistent. Instead, he takes one single comic situation—and sometimes one that is not even funny by itself—and uses it, it seems, as a mere impetus or pretext for an elaboration of comic devices” (Eikhenbaum, 21). In *The Inspector General*, soon after the mayor announces the impending arrival of “the Inspector General, straight from the capital, and traveling incognito” (Gogol, 1962, 316) the doubles Bobchinsky and Dobchinsky (who actually bear no genetic relation to one another) arrive on the scene with the announcement that the Inspector General is staying incognito in the local hotel, likewise setting the ensuing farce in motion.

In *The Comedy of Errors*, Shakespeare introduces two sets of doubles (genetically related twins) bearing strikingly similar names. Gogol employs the same trick in *The Inspector General* with the doubles, Bobchinsky and Dobchinsky, whose names also bear an unmistakable likeness. The dialogue between Bobchinsky, Dobchinsky, and the town officials reinforce their similarities through their repeated emulation of one another. For instance, Dobchinski pronounces, “Not at all of a bad appearance, in civilian clothes…,” while Bobchinsky answers, ‘Yes, yes—not at all of a bad appearance, and in civilian clothes” (Gogol, 1962 326). Instead of employing actual genetically related doubles as Shakespeare does in *The Comedy of Errors*, Gogol more subtly chooses to use these two non-genetically related characters as his catalyst for a sequence of absurd events. Hence, he shows how eerily similar two separate individuals unrelated by blood can be, and ominously alludes to the frightening possibilities of groupthink.
Robbing these doubles or twins of an individual identity and humanity, Gogol seems to be facetiously referring to the bureaucracy and the hierarchal nature of Russian society especially during this time period. He illustrates people’s unconscious animalistic desire to fit in and be like everyone else. Gogol’s dehumanization of these twins becomes apparent in his description of them, citing himself, (without providing an exact reference) “they simply must have protruding tummies—pointed little ones like pregnant women have” (Nabokov, 38). Nabokov insists that we should thus see Bobchinsky and Dobchinsky as “small and otherwise thin and puny men” (38) with little bellies—a description that seems almost pig-like in nature and possibly hearkens back to the earlier Vertep-like works of Gogol where pigs doubled as devils who bore the mark of the unclean one. At the end of *The Inspector General*, these devils who act as doubles are unmasked just as Khlestakov has unmasked the improprieties and dishonesty of the townsfolk.

This is strikingly similar to how the twins in *The Comedy of Errors* reveal the townsfolk as beastly. As the Duke entreats, “Why, what an intricate impeach is this! I think you all have drunk of Circe’s cup” (Shakespeare, 93). In their confusion, Shakespeare’s townsfolk act in a piggish and irrational manner, accusing each other unjustly, taking the Duke’s words literally, and thinking that they have drunk from Circe’s cup.

Gogol’s use of non-genetically related doubles or twins provokes through comic repetition the idea of a tragic sameness and expands upon the archaic Shakespearian use of actual doubles or twins. Closely related to Gogol’s idea of “laughter through tears,” tragic sameness alludes to a mechanical and absurd consumerist reality that favors narrow-mindedness over freethinking. In *The Comedy of Errors*, Shakespeare suggests a tragic sameness when he sends the doubles or twins upon their journey and they encounter an absurd generosity from strangers wherever they travel because of their identical appearance. Commenting upon the dream-like
situation, the foreign Antipholus S. states, “there’s not a man I meet but doth salute me, as if I were their well-acquainted friend; and every one doth call me by my name. Some tender money to me; some invite me; some others give me thanks for kindnesses; some offer me commodities to buy…” (Shakespeare, 73). Both Gogol and Shakespeare reflect upon herd mentality through the use of absurd or comical repetition that emphasizes the absurdity of sameness. Gogol even states in *The Overcoat*, “Thus everything in holy Russia is infected with imitation and each one mimics and apes his superior” (Gogol, 1998, 198). The characters seem so foolish that the audience doubts that they could be that transparent and superficial. Though both authors may allude to what is ignoble, the audience can only deduce what constitutes probity. But as Nabokov puts it, the writers would probably still “…welcome the right sort [of reader]—my brothers, my doubles” (Nabokov, 150). Through the use of doubles or twins, both Gogol and Shakespeare explore the complexity of human nature and the human tendency toward tragic sameness.

In both the *Comedy of Errors* and *The Inspector General* officials appear to have a complex and paradoxical nature. They express emotional sincerity, but at the same time embrace the automatism of a callous, cold bureaucracy. As the Duke assures Egeon in *The Comedy of Errors*, “Were it not against our laws, against my crown, my oath, my dignity, which princes, would they, may not disannul, my soul should advocate for thee…. But though art adjudged to the death, and passed sentence may not be recalled but to our honor’s great disparagement, yet will I favor thee in what I can” (Shakespeare, 34). Facing death because of a new bureaucratic and absurd law that forbids any merchant from Syracuse to enter Ephesus, Egeon receives the false pity of his anguished executioner, the Duke of Ephesus (who actually has the power to pardon him). The specious Duke of Ephesus even claims that if the law did not forbid it he would relieve Egeon of his tragic fate post-haste.
Similarly, officials act insincerely in *The Inspector General* and reflect a trivial and vulgar society. At one point the Judge says emphatically to some of his fellow townsfolk, “Well, what do you consider transgressions? There are transgressions—and transgressions. I tell the whole world I take bribes—but what do those bribes consist of? Why, greyhound pups! That’s an entirely different matter!” (Gogol, 1962, 320). This statement rife with hyperbole is an illogical rationalization for taking bribes and makes it difficult for the audience to identify with the Judge. Throughout the play, the Mayor makes remarks along similar lines, stating with “reverent illogicality” that “Alexander the Great is a hero, but why break chairs?” (Fanger, 131). All of the characters in *The Comedy of Errors* seem to be in a dream-like, irrational, almost purgatorial state. Referring to his partner twin, one of the doubles even alludes directly to this purgatorial-like state that all the characters appear to be waffling in, pointing out that his partner twin is “in Tartar limbo worse than hell. A devil in an everlasting garment hath him” (Shakespeare, 71). In his earlier works, Gogol seeks out and ridicules the devil, but in *The Inspector General* he leaves out the physical everlasting garment as the central plot device meant to create chaos and irrational fear. Instead, he cloaks his prose with apparent gaps in logic and utilizes hyperbole to create irrationality, confusion, and chaos.

Confusion and illogical behavior in *The Comedy of Errors* and *The Inspector General* stems from dual identities or, as Jorgenson puts it, the “two higher forms of mistaken identity [which] are mistaking the true nature of another person and mistaking one’s own nature” (Shakespeare, 22). Khlestakov clearly misjudges his own self-worth and true nature as being “nothing but a common pen-pusher, at the very bottom of the Civil Service” (Gogol, 1969, 334). He refuses to psychologically comprehend the idea that “…his old man sends him money for

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3The Red Jacket of the Devil that serves as the central plot device in Gogol’s *Fair at Sorochintsi*. 
living expenses” (Gogol, 1969, 334) and that his whimsical existence depends entirely on the goodwill of others, not on the quality of his work or the fineness of his character. After being mistaken for a Government Inspector, we see, as Fanger writes, “Khlestakov [becomes] more than an empty young man with picaresque tendencies” (Fanger, 131). Khlestakov’s character suddenly seems to be endowed with great purpose. He becomes the Government Inspector in his own mind and gains growing self-confidence via the gullibility of the townsfolk who blindly believe his guiles. In Gogol’s reading of his own play, Khlestakov

expands, he feels good, he sees that everything is going well, and that he’s being listened to, and for that reason alone he speaks more smoothly, unconstrainedly, from the soul…. He lies with feeling, and his eyes express the pleasure that this gives him. This is in general the best and most poetic moment of his life—almost a kind of inspiration (Fanger, 131).

Correspondingly, Shakespeare’s characters misunderstand their true selves. Their struggle, however, has more to do with their outward appearance rather than self-deception as in the case of Khlestakov. One of the doubles in the Comedy of Errors discusses his inability to see what disguise his soul wears due to his identity being repeatedly mistaken. He asks, “Am I in earth, on heaven, or in hell? Sleeping or waking? Mad or well advised? Known unto these and to myself disguised!” (Shakespeare, 51).

Khlestakov’s ability to fool himself into thinking that he is an important and worthy person that others should fawn over could be a wider allegory aimed at the audience. Gogol may be suggesting that the audience members are fooling themselves into thinking they are morally superior to Khlestakov and are incapable of the behavior he displays. Referring to what he calls
“radical self-exposure” as the turning point, Fanger writes that in *The Inspector General*, “The comedy of real terror based on false assumptions is thus doubled when the mayor pays [Khlestakov] a trembling visit…” (Fanger, 130). So, in both of these plays, dual identities lie at the root of the confusion. Perhaps both writers make use of dual identities to reflect the dualism that exists within the human soul as well as the internal battle between good and evil that causes great confusion within human nature (as a result of the numerous corrupting elements of the modern world).

Puns and double-meanings abound in both *The Comedy of Errors* and *The Inspector General*. They celebrate the confusion within the human soul and the double meanings of words or actions that can eventually lead to ruin. In the *Inspector General*, the Mayor angrily accuses Dobchinsky and Bobchinsky by saying, “All you do is snoop through the town and mix everybody up, you damned chatterboxes; you breed gossip, you bobtailed magpies, you!” (Gogol, 1962, 409). At the end of *The Comedy of Errors*, the Duke markedly exclaims, “With all my heart I’ll gossip at this feast.” So it seems that “gossip” in *The Comedy of Errors* and “gossip” in *The Inspector General* breed misunderstanding—another form of double-meaning and obfuscation. Linguistic double meanings in the text indicate the layering of language. Eikhenbaum points out that they hold the key to the “real dynamic element and, by the same token, the esthetic structure of Gogol’s works [which] depend on the composition of skaz, on a play with language” (Eikhenbaum, 24). Eikhenbaum postulates that there exists within Gogol’s texts a “duality” of language, both an official language and a literary language working to disarm and shake the reader out of a normalized way of thinking. Both Shakespeare and Gogol purposefully attempt to disarm their audiences with sarcasm and satire, the ridiculous, and the
absurd. This lends any sentimental statements greater resonance in sharp contrast to the facetious tone of the plays.

Deviating from his own “double,” Shakespeare, Gogol takes the Shakespearean resolution, poetic justice, and turns it upon its head by choosing not to resolve The Inspector General. Gogol’s plays incorporate Kant’s ideas, those related to the noumenon; things that we cannot perceive, that are difficult to grasp, and may not be real, such as the “soul.” Weaving in and out of the phenomenal and occasionally grappling with the noumenon, Gogol manifests different aspects of his double, Shakespeare, in his works. Unlike Shakespeare, Gogol explicitly brings his doubling device to the surface with an aside to the audience, “What are you laughing at? You’re laughing at yourselves” (Gogol, 1962, 408). But his hyperbole and doubling extends beyond exposé and grasps at axioms when Bobchinsky instructs Khlestakov when he goes to the capital to “tell all those different high dignitaries, all those senators and admirals, now—tell them that, now, ‘Your Serenity—or Your Excellency—there’s a Peter Ivanovich Bobchinsky living in such-and-such town” (Gogol, 1962, 377). These musings on Bobschinsky’s part seem to reflect Gogol’s desultory journey as a writer. They reveal a doubly tortured soul at odds with his own existence. However, behind the acrimonious satire, Gogol earnestly yearns to discover a singular, lasting, and beautiful truth that redeems and transcends the cliché, bland, and banal that he so lovingly portrays.

Works Cited


4 Professor Amelia Glaser 11.24.08


