The Grotesque Fetishism of the Overcoat

“The Overcoat” is the title and central object of Gogol’s 1842 short story, and it forms a key element of what Boris Eichenbaum calls the “grotesque” in this work. As a formalist literary theorist, Eichenbaum interpreted the qualities of narrative devices in a text in order to support concepts of formal and aesthetic unity. One of these qualities, the grotesque, illustrates the process of change in the plot. The formal unity of the grotesque is demonstrated with narrative devices that change the insignificant into the significant. However, Eichenbaum’s formalist analysis does not evaluate the social mechanisms that allow the change in significance to occur. Karl Marx describes the fetishization of objects as a similar narrative to the grotesque; the insignificant material becomes a significant commodity through material and social transformations. Therefore, fetishism can be interpreted as a social mechanism that enables the narrative grotesque to formally develop in “The Overcoat.”

In his essay “The Structure of Gogol’s ‘The Overcoat,’” Eichenbaum describes the formal qualities that constitute the story’s structure:

The style of the grotesque demands, in the first place, that the described situation or event be contained in a small world to the point of fantastic, of artificial experiences completely cut off from the large reality, from the real fullness of spiritual life, and in the second place that this be done not with a didactic or satirical intent, but with the aim of giving scope for a playing with reality, for breaking up and freely displacing its elements, so that the usual correlations and connections (psychological and logical) turn out, in this newly constructed world, to be unreal, and each trifle can grow to colossal dimensions.1

The objects within Gogol’s story become structural and narrative devices of the grotesque when they gain significance. This is particularly true of the overcoat itself, which appears in the story

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1 Eichenbaum, 395.
in different physical and non-physical forms. The overcoat’s formal significance is dependent on the narrative context, which constantly changes and reevaluates the subjective and objective value of the overcoat in these different forms. At the same time, Akaky Akakyivich’s social relations also transform, revealing the particular social and personal significance of the overcoat as a commodity. The four commoditized forms of the overcoat mirror the structure of the plot and trace the grotesque throughout the story: Akaky’s old “dressing jacket” justifies the appeal of a “new” overcoat; the idea of the new overcoat reflects on Akaky's grotesque suffering to save for it; the physical form of the new overcoat grotesquely transforms Akaky's social significance; and the absence of the overcoat signifies Akaky’s grotesque bathos.

The overcoat appears first as Akaky Akakyvich's own tattered but suitable garment. Petrovitch the tailor, however, rejects Akaky’s hope for the coat's repair, forcing him to consider buying a new overcoat. The idea of a new overcoat infects Akaky’s thoughts, and it becomes the “future overcoat” identified by Eichenbaum as part of the grotesque. After first suffering for the idea of the overcoat, Akaky is finally able to afford it, and as a physical object, it gives Akaky both warmth and social status. The grotesque sequence of events transforms Akaky from socially insignificant to socially significant before returning him to insignificance. When he is robbed of his overcoat while walking home from a party, his sense of identity is taken with it, and thus the physical overcoat transforms into the absence of the overcoat. In other words, when Akaky is stripped of his new garment, the inertia of the idea of the overcoat allows it to continue to have affective qualities. Akaky is no longer recognized and respected when entering bureaucratic spaces. The absence of his overcoat even results in physical deterioration: it drains him physically and spiritually until he dies. Akaky, in turn, has become grotesque. Like the stolen

2 Marx.
overcoat, he continues to affect the fantastic world of the story through spiritual inertia.

The grotesque transformation of the insignificant into the significant in “The Overcoat” includes a semiotic relationship between the form of the overcoat and Akaky’s social position. While Eichenbaum’s essay provides an aesthetic understanding of the story’s structure, it does not account for the social dynamics that structure the grotesque nature of the overcoat. Karl Marx’s essay “The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof” defines the process of the transformation and mystification of objects within a particular social context. Objects are transformed from nature to suit a particular function. The “use-value” of the object is correlated to its functionality to an individual. When the social division of labor involves private producers, labor time and expenditure are calculated to fulfill societal and personal desire.³

Petrovitch, for example, is a private producer who works within the social division of labor (Gogol’s depiction of the bureaucracy supports this claim) in order to fulfill both his and Akaky’s desires. The social relationship between Akaky and Petrovitch is mediated by the production and sale of the overcoat. The form of the coat as an idea, which influences Akaky to suffer for its sake, is an ideal that is obstructed by the exchange-value of the overcoat, since the price was more than Akaky could afford. It has become a commodity because it has been stamped with the social characteristic of its production. This social characteristic is the hidden mechanism that mediates the structural transformations of the grotesque in “The Overcoat.” The transformation of the insignificant into the significant is analogous to the transformation of a physical object into a commodity. The overcoat becomes “fetishized” and imbued with new significance. For Akaky, the overcoat as a commodity provides use-value in keeping him warm, and the grotesque reactions of the social world around him indicate that the garment has some

³ Ibid., 322.
sort of mysterious quality because of its production. When the overcoat is lost, it takes with it the mysterious quality that enchanted Akaky’s co-workers and the thieves who stole it, the time and energy that Akaky put into obtaining the overcoat, as well as his identity in relation to it. The grotesque construction of these episodes exaggerates the importance of the overcoat, but the idea of the overcoat as a commodity form creates a standard by which to judge the extent of the exaggeration. Once again, the various forms of the overcoat’s materiality as an object correspond with their positions within the structure of grotesque transformation, as well as their positions in the production of the garment.

Eichenbaum’s criteria for the grotesque and Marx’s concept of “commodity fetishism” complement each other in a way that gives new meaning to “The Overcoat.” Although the formalist theorists in the early Soviet Union were ostracized for their concentration on form over content by the so-called “Marxists” of the time, Marx’s theories concerning the production of commodities encompasses both form and content and agree with Eichenbaum’s definition of the grotesque. The function of the overcoat within the story is threefold: it expresses the grotesque, it changes forms through the story, and it mediates the social division of labor. By examining its forms in relation to the grotesque and social actants, the overcoat becomes a very complicated intersection of Russian literature and society.

At the beginning of the tale, the grotesque starts in its primitive phase alongside the overcoat. In Gogol’s narrative, Akaky is “contained in a world to the point of the fantastic” and “cut off from larger reality.” The fantastic world of St. Petersburg is composed of private individuals such as Akaky, bureaucratic assemblages, and the climate. The climate is the literary device that Gogol uses to define affective qualities of non-social phenomenon on Akaky. The

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4 Gogol, 395.
climate undergoes grotesque transformations that are semiotically identified with Akaky's emotions and well-being. Gogol presents the relationship between Akaky and the climate as almost causal; at the same time, however, he allows the grotesque to develop in order to highlight the complexities inherent in this relationship. Gogol makes the relationship even more complex by depicting Akaky as a socio-economic victim of the climate. He states that the northern frost is “a might foe for all who receive a salary of four hundred rubles or about that sum.” Eichenbaum would frame this as an “artificial experience” that expresses the grotesque, but it is within this realm of artificiality that Gogol is able to articulate what the “real” experience would be in relation to it (precisely by not showing it). He is able to extract the transformative relationship of a particular phenomenon (weather and well-being) and express it grotesquely. Gogol creates a similar relationship with Akaky and society—foregrounding the grotesque transformation by solidifying Akaky’s identity as a static bureaucrat.

The first form of the overcoat connects the phenomenon of affective weather with social significance. It also has a function in foregrounding the grotesque way in which Akaky feels and is recognized throughout the plot. These two phenomena correspond to what Marx refers to as “use-value” and “exchange value.” Use-value is an unquantifiable term that describes the fulfillment of a personal function. For example, the overcoat’s use-value has diminished because it no longer keeps him warm. Exchange-value is the social characteristic of labor expenditure superimposed on the object as a price; it is a seemingly objective attribute that is socially recognized. The coat in this form is a mere “dressing-jacket,” and it stands in contrast to the socially and personally valuable overcoats belonging to other people. The grotesque weather and the grotesque social context influence Akaky to himself become grotesque, to spiritually commit

5 Gogol 66.
to the mediating object of these two phenomena. Thus, Akaky seeks out a new form of the overcoat in order to successfully transcend his own static existence.

The second pillar of Gogol’s grotesque structure emerges when Akaky visits Petrovitch to have his overcoat repaired. Eichenbaum points out that Gogol pays particular attention to “Petrovitch's toe” or his “snuff box” in order to turn the insignificant into the significant and Petrovitch into a grotesque character. As such, he is a part of the external environment, a part of St. Petersburg that has transformative effects on Akaky’s personal and social life. Eichenbaum also points out that Akaky possesses a particular grotesque spirituality connected with his work as a copy clerk, which is nourished by complacency and bureaucratic repetition. The overcoat is similarly connected to his work as a copy clerk and Akaky’s health. Once the overcoat fails to function according to its use-value or as professional recognition, this spirituality becomes displaced. The insignificant becomes significant. Thus, Akaky must have his overcoat repaired in order to be himself.

The second form of the overcoat is that of an idea, constructed by Petrovitch in order to exploit Akaky’s situation. Petrovitch exploits Akaky by acting as a private producer fulfilling a social and personal desire. As such, he has a particular grotesque subjectivity that transforms Akaky’s worn overcoat into a “dressing jacket” and posits the idea of a “new” overcoat in its place. By declaring the object useless, two perceptions and forms of the overcoat take shape. Petrovitch is able to manipulate Akaky’s dislocated spirituality into the idea of a new overcoat, appealing to the form’s use-value in relation to the old form. Like the weather, Petrovitch becomes a foe to those who make four hundred rubles. The price of the idea of the new overcoat exceeds Akaky’s budget; its exchange-value and use-value are no longer related. Akaky must

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6 Ibid., 68
7 Ibid., 396.
undergo a grotesque transformation himself in order to stay the same Akaky that he was at the beginning of the story.

Eichenbaum's analysis only goes so far in understanding the relationship of Akaky’s socio-economic position to the high cost of the new overcoat. In order to understand the forms and values of the overcoat as disputed by Akaky and Petrovitch, it is important to note that even in Gogol’s small fantastic world, Petrovitch is a private producer and Akaky is a private consumer. Likewise, it is fundamental to understand that this power dynamic is located in the artificial context of a grotesque tale. Why, then, does Akaky agree to the price? The answer is two-fold—on the one hand, he needs it to be warm and socially significant. On the other hand, there is a deterministic mechanism implicit in the manner of the overcoat’s production, resulting in a fetishism of the commodity form.

The overcoat’s “enigmatic” qualities as an idea reflect its transformation into a “commodity form.” For Eichenbaum, the enigma and mysteriousness of the overcoat as an idea functions as a grotesque device. It expresses the transformation of the insignificant into the significant. For Marx, the enigma of this idea marks the transformation of the physical object into a commodity. “A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men’s labor appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labor.” In other words, the second form of the “future overcoat” is mysterious, since both Akaky and Petrovitch must work for its materialization, but their socio-economic disparity is not considered in the price.

The second form of the overcoat has grotesque effects on Akaky, redirecting his spirituality in pursuit of an idea. Eichenbaum recognizes Akaky’s personal transformation in

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8 Marx, 320.
9 Ibid.
relation to this idea, elevating Akaky’s perception into an entire worldview: “This world has its own laws, its own proportions. The new overcoat, according to the laws of his world turns out to be a grandiose event.” In this world, Akaky fasts and dedicates his life to the idea of the overcoat. He alters his working habits and budget, effectively becoming a different person in order to reconcile his suffering with the idea of a reward. This self-sacrifice is an essential feature in the process of fetishism, because it affirms the significance of the overcoat as more than just an object, as a commodity form socially constructed through use- and exchange-value. The fact that Akaky receives a generous gratuity signifies that he still exists under the grotesque authority of Gogol, and that the narrator himself wants to enable Akaky to purchase the overcoat. In this instance, the grotesque can be used to explain Akaky’s extraordinary luck, as opposed to the physical suffering he endured to save money. In the words of Eichenbaum, it is another “artificial experience.” After saving enough money, Akaky and Petrovitch are able to produce the new overcoat.

The third grotesque transformation of the overcoat is the production of the new overcoat. Upon its completion, the idea of the overcoat becomes a physical object. Likewise, Akaky’s world grotesquely transforms as the overcoat takes on more than the personal significance of an idea. The overcoat as a physical object has “two advantages: one [is] its warmth, the other [is] its beauty.” Eichenbaum would see this as a way for Gogol to construct a situation that “intends to give scope for playing with reality.” In this reality, Akaky is spiritually fulfilled and socially recognized. The overcoat as a physical object mediates the phenomena described earlier by keeping him warm and giving him social significance. Once again, there is a mysterious force

10 Gogol, 396.
11 Ibid., 71.
12 Eichenbaum, 395.
emanating from the overcoat that induces Akaky’s personal and social transfiguration. Gogol achieves the grotesque by transforming Akaky into a significant Akaky by means of the enigmatic new overcoat. Linguistically, he achieves this by exaggerating details and making use of hyperbole and puns (Eichenbaum). For instance, Akaky handles the overcoat “with his own hands,” absurdly suggesting a narrative insecurity over the ownership and handling of the coat.\textsuperscript{13} While the grotesque accounts for Gogol’s artistic calculations to the extent that insignificant “things” become significant, it does not examine the properties of the overcoat that mobilize personal and social change.

The two advantages of the new overcoat, as identified by the narrator, were its warmth and its goodness. These two advantages directly correlate with two qualities that define a commodity’s value: its use-value and its exchange-value. Having already justified the interpretation of the overcoat as a commodity, it is now possible to understand its value as such. The transformation of Akaky’s lifestyle mirrors the new form of the overcoat. It enables him to walk around the city free from the forces of the climate, that is, to be warm. Likewise, it enables him to be more like his co-workers and accepted socially: it is good. These two advantages intertwine when Akaky is invited by his co-workers to a party to celebrate his new overcoat. The overcoat gains significance as a commodity because it is privately produced and given value; and this value, according to Marx, “converts every product into a social hieroglyphic.”\textsuperscript{14} In the grotesque and fantastic world of Akaky, the overcoat too becomes a social hieroglyphic because of its value. The overcoat is decoded by his co-workers and given social significance; in turn raising Akaky to the social level of his overcoat. He has assimilated into the grotesque society and found comfort in the grotesque climate of St. Petersburg. In attaining the new overcoat,

\textsuperscript{13} Gogol, 73.
\textsuperscript{14} Marx, 322.
Akaky is able to wear and become a status symbol.

After Akaky leaves the party, he is accosted by two muggers and robbed of his overcoat. Eichenbaum identifies this scene as “an effective apotheosis of the grotesque.”\textsuperscript{15} Structurally, it could be isolated as an episode of the grotesque, conforming to Eichenbaum’s criteria. “Here the story emerges into a world of more usual concepts and facts, but everything is treated in the style of a playing with fantasy.”\textsuperscript{16} Akaky is physically isolated from the public, submerged in the haze of a brutal St. Petersburg climate, and confronted with danger under the strict authorial control of the narrator. The two advantages of the overcoat (warmth and goodness) are placed in a grotesque situation of “deception,” which Eichenbaum characterizes as “a device of the grotesque in reverse.”\textsuperscript{17} The warmth and goodness of the overcoat in this form continue to function effectively with the fantastic environment and Akaky.

Marx’s metaphor of the social hieroglyphic is important in making sense of the grotesque reversal in the ending. The overcoat as a commodity and social hieroglyphic implies that it signifies wealth and importance. Akaky’s co-workers decoded the overcoat in a positive way, embracing a grotesque fetishism by throwing a party—thereby transforming both Akaky’s and the overcoat’s significance. In the end, the social hieroglyphic is decoded by muggers and stolen, leaving Akaky cold and insignificant. This is the reversal of the significant into the insignificant. The final form of the overcoat becomes its absence.

The absence of the overcoat signifies an absence of mediation between Akaky and the outside world. He becomes vulnerable to the weather and mentally unstable. His spirit has been displaced along with the overcoat in which he had vested so much. Likewise, the external world

\textsuperscript{15} Eichenbaum, 398.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 399.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
around this absence changes as Akaky deals with the void. The socio-economic status that accompanied the overcoat is displaced, and Akaky’s lack of a commodity earns him almost no recognition in the grotesque, bureaucratic St. Petersburg.

Gogol allows Akaky to continue to exist beyond his death, as a ghost. Like his overcoat, Akaky has disappeared and become absorbed by the grotesque reversal of St. Petersburg. He is constructed in the guilt of the “Very Important Person,” appearing to claim his jacket in the final scene of the tale. After taking the man’s overcoat, Akaky ceases to exist as a ghost. Taking the Very Important Person’s overcoat is a creative maneuver intended to punish the person for treating Akaky as insignificant.\textsuperscript{18} Within the context of grotesque reversal the overcoat becomes insignificant, whereas Akaky’s life becomes significant, and his spiritual inertia continues in his ghostly form. The underlying intention of the reversal is to reconcile the forms of the overcoat, that is, to exhibit the affective qualities of an object as an idea, as a physical thing, and as an absence.

The four forms of the overcoat are structurally congruent with the plot and Eichenbaum’s progression of the grotesque. In the tale, they function to express the transformation of the insignificant into the significant. The overcoat as an idea and as a physical object exhibit enigmatic powers similar to Marx’s “commodity.” Likewise, the overcoat as a “dressing jacket” and its form as an absence reflect a grotesque reversal—they become insignificant. The effect of these forms on Akaky can be understood through the relation of the overcoat’s use-value and exchange-value: the use-value is that of warmth so that he can survive the climate, and the exchange-value is the social significance the overcoat confers on him. Reading these texts

\textsuperscript{18} Gogol, 76.
together reveals hidden mechanisms that enhance the many layers of the overcoat as a commodity and mobilize a grotesque aesthetic.

Works Cited

