

Dominika Zielińska

ORCID: 0009-0006-6353-5987

A COMPARATIVE EXPLORATION OF NIKOLAI GOGOL'S WORLD IN HIS LETTERS AND THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

Nikolai Gogol is widely recognized as one of the most prominent Russian authors of the 19th century. Although he is most famous for his novel, *Dead Souls*, which was first published in 1842, he was also a very famous short story writer and a playwright. In his literary works, Gogol explored and popularized the notion of 'little people', which refers to ordinary, often unremarkable individuals who lead routine lives but are depicted with depth and complexity. His greatest mentor was Alexander Pushkin, who later became his cherished friend. Gogol's huge impact on literature all over the world has been noted by writers and critics. His influence has been acknowledged by individuals such as Franz Kafka,¹ Vladimir Nabokov,² Rynosuke Akutagawa³

¹ The names of Franz Kafka and Nikolai Gogol often appear together in literary analysis. Many researchers have already noted Kafka's inspiration in the short stories written by Gogol, especially making *The Metamorphosis*, where he focuses on the character of a salesman Gregor Samsa, who is very similar to the characters created by Gogol in his "little people" stories. Kafka himself considered Gogol to be his "true blood brother".

² Vladimir Nabokov not only acknowledged Gogol but also held him in high regard, considering him one of the greatest writers. Nabokov wrote a critical study titled *Nikolai Gogol*, published in 1944, which delves deeply into Gogol's literary genius and influence as well as criticizes his eccentric persona.

³ While there is no extensive documentation of Akutagawa explicitly detailing Gogol's impact on his work, scholars and literary critics have noted the similarities in their styles and thematic explorations. Additionally, Akutagawa's short story *The Nose*, which revolves around the absurd predicament of a priest whose nose grows

or Flannery O'Connor.⁴ Nikolai Gogol not only captivated readers with his imaginative narratives, but he also left behind a rich collection of letters that provided insight into his worldview and the society of his time. This essay aims to juxtapose the world depicted in Gogol's letters with the contemporary world, highlighting both resemblances and dissimilarities.

Social inequalities in Gogol's time

Despite the long time between the Russian writer's time and the present, we find that many of the issues Gogol addressed in his correspondence still resonate today. Modern society, like Gogol's Russia, is characterized by deep inequalities. Despite technological advancements and economic growth, poverty and wealth inequality persist in numerous regions of the world. The disparity between the affluent and the impoverished persists, resulting in societal tensions and unrest.

In the early to mid-19th century, the Russian Empire was characterized by a rigid social hierarchy. The society was divided into four classes: the nobility, clergy, merchants, urban working class, and peasantry. The aristocracy owned large estates and lived in luxury, while the majority of the population, especially the serfs, lived in abject poverty. In his letters, Gogol frequently critiqued the moral and social decline he observed within the Russian aristocracy. He lamented their preoccupation with wealth and status, frequently juxtaposing it with the suffering and deprivation of the peasantry. For instance, in his correspondence, Gogol frequently emphasized the predicament of the common people and the indifference of the affluent class towards their hardships. This view is clearly evident in the letter he wrote in 1844 to his confidante Alexandra Osipovna Smirnova, in which he noted:

I turn to your assaults on the folly of Petersburg youth, who have offered golden garlands and toasted goblets to foreign singers and actresses when whole provinces in Russia are starving. This is not a result, however, of folly, nor of

inexplicably long, bears a striking resemblance to Gogol's tale of the same title, *The Nose*, where a man wakes up to discover his nose missing.

⁴ O'Connor's use of dark humor, her focus on human flaws, and her exploration of moral and spiritual dilemmas echo the stylistic and thematic elements found in Gogol's stories. She herself admitted in an interview from July, 1962: "I'm sure Gogol influenced me".

hardness of heart, nor even of frivolity of thought. It is a result of normal human heedlessness. The miseries and horrors produced by hunger are far from us; they are happening in the interior of the provinces, they are not before our eyes – that is the solution to and the explanation of everything! (Gogol, 1969, 29).

In the contemporary world, wealth inequality still remains a significant issue on a global scale. According to the World Inequality Report 2022 the richest 10% of the global population owns 76% of all wealth, while the poorest half only owns 2%. This disparity is not confined to any particular country but is rather a worldwide phenomenon. Tax policies in many countries often favor the wealthy, exacerbating income inequality. Capital gains, for instance, are often subject to lower tax rates than regular income.

Corruption, nepotism, and other vices in Gogol's time

Nikolai Gogol's works, particularly his letters and stories such as *The Government Inspector*, offer a vehement critique of the bureaucratic corruption prevalent in Tsarist Russia. Gogol depicted a government plagued by inefficiency, bribery, and a lack of accountability. The tsar Nicholas I, who reigned from 1825 to 1855 (which are the years that Gogol was most prolific as a creator) is a controversial figure in Russian history, although numerous contemporary historians criticize his governance, like Barbara Jelavich, who points out his many failures including the “catastrophic state of Russian finances” (Jelavich, 1974, 119) and the bureaucracy “which was characterized by graft, corruption, and inefficiency” (Jelavich, 1974, 119). Additionally Gogol's letters often lamented the pervasive dishonesty and self-serving nature of officials. He articulated his criticism strongly but with great subtlety while describing the main character from *The Government Inspector*, a civil servant named Ivan Kholestakow, in a letter to Shchepkin, who was supposed to stage the play, from May 10th, 1836:

He is simply stupid; he babbles only because he sees that they are disposed to listen; he lies because he had a hearty dinner and drank a considerable quantity of wine. He is frivolous only when he approaches the ladies. The scene in which he starts lying at random should receive special attention. His every word, i.e., sentence or utterance, is a completely unexpected impromptu, and therefore should be expressed abruptly (Gogol, 1969, 55).

Gogol frequently also addressed the issue of nepotism, where government positions and favors were often granted based on personal connections instead

of merit. This practice led to widespread incompetence and further entrenched the power of the elite, exacerbating social inequalities and hindering progress.

Similar to the 19th century, bureaucracy and corruption remain significant challenges for many countries, including Russia. Although forms of corruption may have evolved, the fundamental issues of nepotism, cronyism, and bribery continue to plague governments and institutions around the globe. The inefficiency of bureaucratic systems frequently impedes progress and incites frustration among citizens. According to Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), corruption is a pervasive problem affecting both developed and developing countries. The CPI scores countries on a scale from 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean), and the global average score in 2023 was only 43, indicating widespread corruption issues. It is important to note that, according to the study, 23 countries out of 180 ranked countries fell to their lowest scores to date in 2023, including Russia, with a score of only 26 points out of 100.

In his correspondence, Gogol also alluded to the cholera epidemic that was ravaging Europe during the 19th century. He describes it with very passionate and destructive words, such as 'raging' and 'decimating', saying it 'has chased everyone off in all directions'. This is noteworthy in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, which can be aptly described with similar terms. Despite the advancements in technology and medicine, approximately 7 million individuals perished due to the illness caused by coronavirus or complications associated with it.

Censorship and the freedom of speech crisis

Censorship has a long history in Russia and has been an instrument of power for many centuries, including during Gogol's times, which certainly caused him and many other authors before and after him a great headache. His satirical play, *The Government Inspector*, which focused on the criticism of corruption in Russia, received considerable backlash from both the government and society. The reception of his work prompted his resignation and dissatisfaction, which he expressed in a letter to Mikhail Shchepkin in April 1836:

Everyone is against me. Respectable middle-aged civil servants shout that there is nothing holy for me if I dare to talk this way about those who serve the government. The police are against me, the merchants are against me, the literary people are against me. They curse and go to the play: it is impossible to get tickets for the fourth performance. Were it not for the lofty intercession of the

Emperor my play would not have appeared on the stage at all; there were already people trying to have it forbidden. Now I see what it means to be a comic writer. The slightest phantom of truth, and not one man, but entire classes will rise up against you (Gogol, 1969, 54).

The issues and emotions expressed by Gogol in the letter above seem similar to what contemporary Russian authors may feel. Censorship continues to be a significant issue, particularly under the administration of President Vladimir Putin. The Russian government exerts control over various forms of media, including television, radio, print, and online platforms, and seemingly also over the opinions of public figures. A lot of Russian authors, artists, or even scientists speaking against the authorities meet with great backlash or even bans from society. This happened to Lyudmila Ulitskaya, who spoke against Russian aggression towards Ukraine, and is now officially banned in Russia along with all her works. On March 1, 2024, the Russian government declared Lyudmila Ulitskaya a “foreign agent”.

Moral dilemmas of Nikolai Gogol

Moreover, contemporary society grapples with its own set of spiritual and moral dilemmas. In an increasingly secular world, traditional values are often sidelined in favor of individualism and consumerism. Many people feel disconnected from a sense of purpose or meaning, leading to a rise in mental health issues and existential angst. In his letters, Nikolai Gogol frequently lamented the moral and spiritual decline he observed in Russian society. He criticized the superficiality, materialism, and lack of genuine spiritual values among the nobility. Gogol believed that this moral decay was a significant barrier to the country's progress and well-being.

Comparatively, contemporary society faces its own set of moral dilemmas, shaped by the complexities of the modern world. Issues such as consumerism, digital privacy, and the ethical implications of artificial intelligence dominate today's discourse. While materialism continues to be a concern, modern moral dilemmas also encompass global challenges like climate change, social justice, and the balance between technological advancement and ethical responsibility. Both Gogol's time and the present day grapple with the consequences of moral choices on a societal level, highlighting the enduring relevance of ethical introspection and the need for a moral compass in navigating the evolving landscape of human values.

Was Gogol a feminist?

It seems excessive to employ the term *feminist* in reference to a male Russian author of the 19th century. The women's movement in Russia only began to exist in the 1860s, and its influence grew during the 1900s. Nonetheless, in his letters, he did express certain opinions that, even in the contemporary times, could be characterized as feminist. It appears that the most important letter is the one from 1844, allegedly addressed to Alexandra Osipowna, which he also published in his own publication of his selected correspondence with friends under the name *Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends* in 1847.

You believe that you cannot have any influence on society; I believe the opposite. The influence of a woman can be very great, especially now, in the present order or disorder of society, in which there is a kind of spiritual chill, a kind of moral fatigue, demanding reanimation. In order to produce this reanimation, the co-operation of woman is indispensable. This truth, in the form of a dim presentiment, is being carried through all the world, and everyone is now awaiting something from woman (Gogol, 1969, 55).

Nikolai Gogol's belief that women can have a great influence on society can surely be connected in a way to some conservative visions. He believed women were to bring warmth and light into the home, guide their husbands morally, and raise their children, emphasizing their intellectual capabilities within these confines. This perspective is starkly contrasted by contemporary feminist ideas, which advocate for gender equality across all areas of society. Nonetheless, it seems noteworthy that women in those times were rather neglected and ignored, so just noticing them in a way that implies great influence and bringing order to the disordered world, seems monumental, especially coming from a privileged man.

Alexandra Smirnova was also a significant figure in terms of Gogol's alleged feminism. She is a woman whom Gogol admired greatly. Their relationship is one of the more enigmatic aspects of Gogol's personal life. She appears to have been a source of inspiration and emotional support for Gogol during certain periods of his life, particularly during his later years, when he struggled with personal and spiritual crises. But most importantly, in this case, Smirnova may be the closest an early-19th-century woman could be to 'feminist'. She was very passionate about independence and was always willing to speak her mind, regardless of the critical looks that might come upon her, especially from men. Alexandra Smirnova possessed a highly educated and well-read personality.

In comparison to modern times, latest data, such as the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2023, highlights significant progress in closing the gender gap in education and political empowerment, underscoring the importance of women's contributions beyond the household. Studies also show that women in leadership roles enhance ethical decision-making and organizational performance, challenging the traditional notion that their influence should be restricted to the private sphere. The shift from Gogol's era to today marks a profound change in how society views and values women's roles, recognizing their intellectual, moral, and professional capabilities in the public domain. This evolution underscores the ongoing efforts of feminist movements to achieve true gender equality, advocating for women's full participation in all aspects of life, including leadership, education, and public engagement.

Logically, there are also numerous studies that continue to demonstrate the disparities between males and females. Women still continue to experience neglect in their workplace, and their position is still being reduced to that of a mother and a wife, especially in countries with more conservative views where gender roles are more traditional. Women are also less likely to hold higher positions; only 28.2% of managers are women, and there are only 13 female presidents in 193 countries.

In conclusion, while there are undeniable similarities between the world Nikolai Gogol describes in his letters and the world we live in today, there are also significant differences shaped by historical, cultural, and technological changes. Gogol's critiques of inequality, corruption, and moral decay continue to resonate, reminding us of the enduring challenges facing human society. By reflecting on Gogol's insights, we can gain a deeper understanding of our own world and work towards building a more just and compassionate society.

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