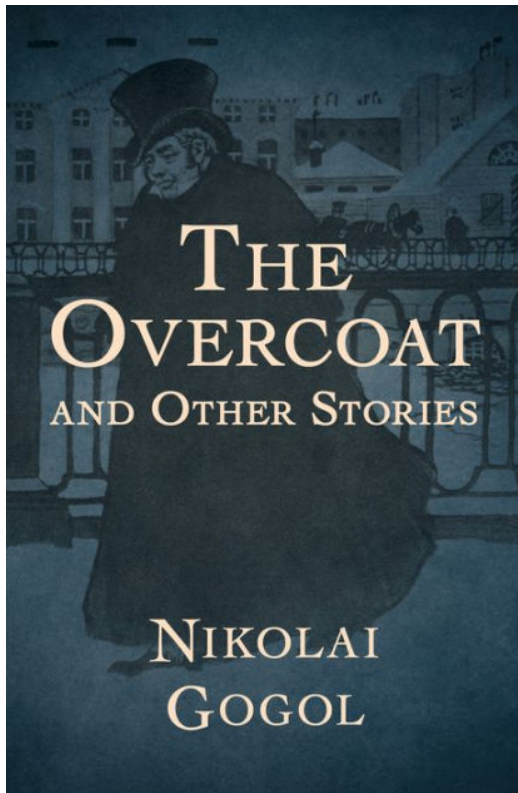


Reflections on the death of Akakyevich



The world needs more than ever compassion and sympathy, not wars!

One of the most memorable characters, created by the Russian writer Nicolas Gogol (1809-1852) in his wonderful short story « The Overcoat » (1843), is Akaky Akakievich. The tragic hero whose pathetic death is a constant reminder of the sad ending of the vulnerable man in an environment void of human empathy.

The story narrates the short life of an unfortunate lowest-grade clerk in Saint Petersburg who is being pushed to his death by a bureaucratic system and callousness of people around him. It brings sharply into focus the fundamental issue of “brutality of man to man”.

Some of my dearest memories are connected with “The Overcoat”. The story had impressed me first as an adolescent. Later in

the eighties, I taught it as a teacher of English to the high-school girls in my home-town Qamishli, Syria.

Teaching, as a matter of fact, was not at all an easy job in that rural, neglected, north-eastern part of the country, mostly populated by offsprings of traumatized refugees fled from atrocities in Turkey during and after the First World War: like Syriacs, Armenians, Kurds, Assyrians, Chaldeans and of course Arabs. Schools reflected very much the divisions in the community. The ambiance was far from being friendly. Students regrouped in classrooms according to their strong ethnic, tribal and religious affiliations. Communication between them was rare while ethnic languages regularly resonated everywhere. Add to that, neither the students nor their parents cared much about English as a school-subject.

As for teachers, they had first to go through the long and arduous trial of prejudice and stereotyping, before winning the confidence of students. Unfortunately, I was one of those teachers, being a descendant of an Armenian refugee family.

Nevertheless, my experience in teaching "The Overcoat" had completely different results. From the first reading of the story (normally, it took 3 reading-periods to finish, each 50 minute, over a span of 2 weeks) I would notice a notable change in the comportment of my students. An unusual interest in the narrative as well as a profound sympathy for the poor little clerk, would replace everyday classroom chatting and apathy. They would passionately follow the dramatic decline of Akakyievich, having received insults and injuries one after another. Strangely enough, it looked that the tragedy of our hero was bringing the different groups closer together. The class was gradually discarding the usual restrictions, revealing more intimacy and friendliness. Chats in the official Arabic language would become frequent among them. Some girls would even start sharing the same bench and read in the same textbooks, something which was not common. But, it was the death of Akakyievich that deeply distressed them and

made their eyes glisten with innocent tears. It was a means of catharsis for them.

I was always wondering how come all this transformation over a very short period of time? How come that the layers of prejudice and mistrust would melt down in few days and spontaneous human sentiments of compassion, pity and love would shine beneath? What was the secret?

To my surprise, the answer came from one of the girls. "Sir" she said in Arabic, "The Overcoat narrates our sad history. We are actually lamenting our own destiny, not that of Akakievich's! ". Overwhelmed by emotions, she could not continue further.

Now that war in Syria has entered its seventh year and half of the population has become displaced, I sometimes recall the prophetic words of that 16 years-old girl and wonder where destiny has thrown her amid this senseless game of wars.

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