



**HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS**

**Hugvísindasvið**

**A Comparative Study on Short Stories by  
Edgar Allan Poe and Nikolai Gogol**

**Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs**

**ENS301G**

**Auður Eva Guðmundsdóttir**

**Janúar 2009**

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**Kt.: 040580-5229**

**Supervisor: Martin Regal**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Edgar Allan Poe and Nikolai Gogol were born in the same year, however there are other similarities and coincidences that make it interesting to compare them. This essay comprises of a detailed comparison of three works by Gogol and two works by Poe. It is divided into 12 sections. The first is a short introduction. The second takes a brief look into the history of the short story. The third and fourth introduce the history of literature in the USA and in Russia. These sections might seem like a broad introduction to many different areas, however they cover important matters for comparing these two authors. The fifth deals briefly with Poe's and Gogol's life. The sixth looks closer at the Romantic era and the genres Gogol and Poe fall into, Fantastic and Gothic. The seventh section gives reasons for which stories were chosen. The five stories chosen for comparison have similarities and differences, which are explored in relation to the authors' genres. The eighth is an overview of the three stories by Gogol chosen for comparison, and has three subsections for each story. The ninth section does the same for Poe's two stories. The tenth section compares common and uncommon entities and themes within all the stories. The eleventh section concludes the essay. These very imaginative and wonderful stories are meant to entertain the reader, however in a different way. Finally the twelfth section contains the bibliography.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

“Most critics regard Edgar Allan Poe and the Russian author Nikolai Gogol as the two greatest and most influential writers of short fiction during the Romantic era” (Charters, p. 1732). Poe is indisputably a Gothic writer but are all his stories Gothic? How do we classify Gogol? Is he the father of Russian realism as some have suggested? The stories analysed here are clearly products of fantasy, which would seem to suggest that they could not be realistic? By using realistic elements Gogol allows the readers to immerse themselves in a completely exaggerated world of fantasy, yet with a belief that this all could have taken place in the real world. In Vladimir Nabokov’s book *Nikolai Gogol* he ridicules the statement that Gogol is regarded a realist. Nabokov acknowledges that absurdities are what make up Gogol’s stories and that more often than not they are not understood by the reader. The stories that will be compared are Gogol’s “The Overcoat”, “The Nose” and “The Portrait” and Poe’s “The Tell Tale Heart” and “The Oval Portrait”. The mood, narratives, themes, settings and characterizations in the stories will be explored in relation to the authors’ genres. What are the similarities in these stories? What are the differences?

## **THE SHORT STORY**

“In the early nineteenth century, German writers were the first to develop original, imaginative narratives that resemble what we call short stories.” (Charters, 1731) A likely forerunner is Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. More famous narratives are by the Grimm brothers, stories developed from folk tales. The first American short story writer is almost inarguably Washington Irving, who was inspired to write “Rip Van Winkle” when he translated a German folktale. Irving influenced other American writers such as Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne who published stories in magazines.

The development and history of the short story has always been considered in relation to the novel. During the eighteenth century, short stories were deemed the same as novels (Shaw, p. 4). Towards the end of the nineteenth century people began to acknowledge that short fiction might have its own principles and be shaped by them rather than sharing the same principles as those of the novel (Shaw, p. 3). According to Edgar Allan Poe, the short story's distinguishing factors from the novel are that it has aesthetic unity and can be read in one sitting (Charters, p. 1787).

The short story varies according to the time it is written in, and there are so many possible types of short stories that it's very hard to find a phrase that summarizes all the diversities (Shaw, p. 20). However, the glossary in Ann Charters book *The Story and its Writer: An Introduction to Short Fiction* offers a good definition, where she defines it as: “[a] short fictional prose NARRATIVE, often including the YARN, the SKETCH, the FABLE, and the TALE. The term is often applied to any work of narrative prose FICTION shorter than a NOVEL” (1787). Gogol's stories are obvious fables, still it's sometimes hard to figure out what the moral of the story is. Ann Charters explains the fable in this way: “A very short, often humorous NARRATIVE told to present a MORAL” (1783).

## **LITERATURE IN THE USA**

When the United States declared independence from the British Empire in 1776, many Americans in the new Republic were more familiar with European history and literature than with colonial and revolutionary American writers. Much American literature was therefore inaccessible to them in its references and allusions. By the second quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Americans had easy access to British literature and criticism. Books by the English Romantics were republished in the US soon after they appeared in print in

Great Britain (Reidhead, p. 957). However, there was an increasing demand for an American voice, form and style. With the War of 1812 this demand was at a peak and some of the biggest names in American literature appeared.

One early American literary giant was Washington Irving. Among the first American writers to be successful in Europe, some regard Irving as the most influential of his peers and the first writer to exhibit a uniquely American style. Irving greatly influenced writers such as Poe and Hawthorne (Reidhead, p. 959-960). Irving was 26 years older than Poe and Gogol. His most important work was published in the United States in 1819 when Poe was a 10-year-old schoolboy with an impressionable mind. Irving wrote *The Sketch Book* in Britain, using material from German folktales. He proved that memorable fiction, such as the short stories “Rip Van Winkle” and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow”, could be set in locations in the United States. These stories were immediately recognized as literary treasures. Irving lived to the age of 76, which at that time was considered a high age. Irving was unique. He had no rival in style in his own country and decades before his death he was considered a classic writer (Reidhead, p. 978-980).

## **LITERATURE IN RUSSIA**

Russian literature has not had paved a road through history. During the time of Mongol occupation in the 13<sup>th</sup> century almost all written literature was religious. The church controlled everything, since the church was the only area the Mongols didn't interfere with (Thompson, p. 45). In a lecture on the 16<sup>th</sup> of January 2008, in Russian Literature History, Rebekka Práinsdóttir stated that literature became stagnant and a clear difference appeared in spoken and written language. During the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century the church and authorities stood together in hindering foreign influence, because they could



be dangerous to the monarch. However, the 17<sup>th</sup> century brought the Time of Troubles in which state and church lost their grip. Worldly literature and western influences started becoming visible in the country and spoken language found its way into written language. By the end of the 1700s Russia had laid the foundation for flowering of Russian literature in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Thompson, p. 113). In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and early 19<sup>th</sup> century book censorship was successively tightened. Authors were held responsible for what they wrote and publication of unsigned articles was forbidden in 1848 (Kelly p. 33).

There are well-known pieces of early history Russian literature, such as *The Tale of Igor's Campaign* and the autobiography of the archpriest Avvakum; *Life of Avvakum*. However, people usually regard Pushkin as a touchstone when looking into Russian literature, and in fact literature from all around the world. The 19<sup>th</sup> century is referred to as the Golden Era of Russian literature; this era includes Pushkin and Gogol. Pushkin was born in 1799 and died in 1837. He was only 10 years older than Gogol and Poe. In order to look at what Gogol was writing it's imperative to mention Pushkin's writing. He was probably the most influential person in Gogol's life as a writer. Pushkin remains today one of the most influential writers in Russia.

Some regard Pushkin's novel in verse, *Evgeni Onegin*, as the greatest Russian novel. It was first published in 1925 and was a pioneering example of the serial novel. It was published chapter by chapter for a period of 7 years (Kelly, p. 35). Pushkin set an example in so many genres of Russian literature, although he didn't write any theatrical dramatic comedies, which represent the splendour of Russian theatre before and after his death. In this area Gogol surpassed him, his play *The Government Inspector* is internationally regarded a masterpiece (Kelly p. 64).

Gogol's *The Government Inspector* and *Dead Souls* were well received by most readers of both liberal and radical mind. Many of these readers deemed Russia backward and oppressive. Gogol was quite generally perceived as rebel or at least "a merciless critic of this uncivilized Russian social system" and because of that he received special attention from the censors and the Third Section (secret police) (Gogol, p. 9).

Moral is recurring in Gogol's works, either his stories have high moral issues or they call attention to the fact that there is no moral. "And the transition from a view of the writer as a metatextual ironist to an emphasis upon responsibility to society can be clearly seen in the case of Nikolai Gogol." (Kelly p. 81) In his short story "The Nose" he mocked the idea that literature was improved with a moral. The tale ends with the narrator trying without success to explain what possible meaning the story could have. According to Gogol, Pushkin was the only person who understood the moral purpose of one of Gogol's most revered novels *Dead Souls*. He said: "A writer's duty is not only to provide pleasant amusement for the mind and the taste; he will pay dearly if his works do not disseminate something of use to the readers." (Kelly, p. 81)

## **POE'S LIFE/GOGOL'S LIFE**

Edgar Allan Poe was born on the 19th of January 1809 in the USA. Two months later in Ukraine Nikolai Gogol was born on the 31<sup>st</sup> of March 1809 (according to the Old Style Julian calendar he was born on the 19<sup>th</sup> of March, making it exactly two months later).

Poe's personal life was full of tragedy. His biological parents were poor actors. His father left the family a year after Poe's birth and his mother died when he was 3 years old in 1811. Poe's father disappeared completely, probably died. A wealthy merchant by the name of John Allan, and his wife, adopted Poe. Poe began writing for a

living when Allan disinherited him. Poe became editor of the *Southern Literary Message*, but resigned after 4 years. He then became editor of *Graham's Magazine*, resigned from there and started his own magazine, which failed. Poe married his almost fourteen-year-old cousin Virginia Clemm, who died at the age of 24. There are not a lot of success stories in Poe's personal life, and even though his collections of tales and poetry sold well his income during his lifetime was less than impressive (Charters, p. 1186). Poe died at the age of 40.

Gogol's father was an owner of a large Ukrainian estate. He wrote, directed and acted in comedies for a rich relative in the family theatre. He died when Gogol was 16 years old. Gogol's mother was kind but not very intelligent and somewhat hysterical. She made up stories about her son, for example that he had invented railroads and the steamship (Gogol, p. 6). Gogol was sent to boarding school as a boy, where he received the nickname "the mysterious dwarf" from his fellow students, because of his physical appearance and odd behaviour (Charters, p. 589). In school Russian students read German Romanticism, where the same material influenced Gogol as influenced Poe through Irving. At the age of 19 Gogol moved to St Petersburg, at that time Russia's capital, to work on his literary career. Gogol was constantly unhappy with what he had written and used to burn his writing. Sometimes because it had received bad review, other times because in his opinion it wasn't good enough (Gogol, p. 6-7). Gogol died 43 years old.

## **THE ROMANTIC ERA - FANTASTIC VS. GOTHIC**

Gogol and Poe belong to the Romantic era, the movement originated in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Western Europe. Romanticism flourished in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it valued individuality, intuition, imagination and feeling (Charters, p. 1787).

Romanticism emphasized strong emotion as a source of experience. Therefore some romantics have been accused of complete irrationality. New emotions emerged in literature, such as fear, anxiety, nervousness and horror. Nature and the experience of meeting an awe-inspiring, untamed nature found its place and is sometimes the central idea in a romantic piece of literature (Wikipedia).

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was an early influence on Romanticism from Germany, with his 1774 novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and his character the very sensitive and passionate artist. The novel is often given the honour of initiating the Romantic Movement. The romantic gothic appeared in the United States with Irving's "Rip Van Winkle", as stated before; Irving used material from German folktales. Gothicism is a genre related to romanticism, some critics even say they are one and the same. It isn't all that easy to tell apart the early Gothic writing and some of the masterpieces classified as Romantic poetry, such as Keats' *The Eve of Saint Agnes* (Williams, p. 3). An early example of a Gothic piece is *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole, which was published in the year 1764 in Britain. In fact it is generally considered the first Gothic novel and an initiator of the gothic genre (Williams, p. 13).

According to literary handbooks, Gothic is a matter of decor and mood-of haunted castle, and brooding, mysterious hero/villain, of beleaguered heroines, of ghosts ("real," or only believed to be), of an ambiguously pleasurable terror, of the nostalgic melancholy of ruins and of remote times and places. Reading this list of elements one might surmise that Gothic is one of those rare genres (like the pastoral or the western) defined primarily by their settings. And yet some works may have a strong Gothic "flavor" while violating almost all the handbook's criteria [...] (Williams, p. 14).

Gothic often entails a haunted castle, however that is most certainly not a requirement and it's good to keep in mind that not every castle is gothic. Gothic is a large and diverse genre and it seems as though from the start critics have known what a problematic category it is. They tried to divide the genre into subcategories, however in spite of that it remained difficult to file the genre perfectly into the filing cabinet. Montague Summers was the first to suggest that there were significant varieties, such as historical Gothic, sentimental Gothic and terror Gothic. Later critics seemed to find endless amounts of subcategories to fill the problematic gaps of the Gothic genre (Williams, p. 17).

Romanticism dominated Russian prose in the 1830's. (Gogol, p 10) The publication of Fyodor Emin's *Letters of Ernest and Doravra* usually dates the appearance of romanticism in Russia. Russian romanticism is what Nikolai Karamylin called "effusions of emotion". Romanticism flourished in Pushkin's writing, for example in his poem *Ruslan and Liudmila* which is based on a Russian folk tale. Pushkin even died romantically in a duel over a woman (Cranston, p. 140-141).

There was an immense shift in literature during the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the earlier form of romanticism made room for realism. Realist writers refrain from explaining their characters' psychology, instead it's shown by the characters' actions and words (Charters, p. 1733). Gogol is often referred to as an initiator and even father of Russian realism. How can a writer belong to the Romantic Era and nonetheless be a Realist? Romance is literally considered unrealistic. Realism is a genre opposed to romanticism. Could it be that Gogol is fundamentally a romantic gothic writer who used reality to make his characters believable? Or was he not at all realistic? Was his exaggeration mistaken for realism?

Fantasy is very recurrent in Poe's and Gogol's writing. In Ann Charters book *The Story and its Writer* there's a helpful glossary of literary terms. Sadly a description of the Gothic is missing. However in this glossary Fantasy is explained in this way:

A NARRATIVE or events in a narrative that have no possible existence in reality and could not have occurred in a real world; used sometimes to amuse or delight readers, sometimes to comment on or illustrate by contrast some aspect of reality, and sometimes, as in a FABLE, to present a clear moral that will not be complicated or diminished by the untidiness or inconsistency of reality [...] (Charters, p. 1783).

Writers of fantastic literature gave attention to the realities a character might experience through a mental disorder, madness, dreams and drug or alcohol induced perceptions. There's an empty space left by the worldly explanations of reality in which a fantastic perception of reality could easily be developed, wavering between the real and the supernatural. Wolfe argued that "[F]antasy writers 'take as their point of departure the deliberate violation of norms and facts we regard as essential to our conventional conception of reality [...].'" Fantasy is "a story based on and controlled by an over violation of what is generally accepted as possibility [...]." (as cited in Blair, 2)

## **CHOICE OF STORIES**

There are obvious similarities in the stories chosen for comparison. The stories are all among the more famous and popular ones from each author, excluding Gogol's story "The Portrait" which didn't receive much fame. "The Portrait" however contains the same life-after-death theme as Poe's story "The Oval Portrait", apart from the title being quite alike. Gogol's story "The Overcoat" deals with a strange obsession for an overcoat much like Poe's story "The Tell Tale Heart" deals with a very unhealthy obsession with

an old man's eye, which eventually results in his murder. Gogol's story "The Nose" is one that simply could not be ignored, its marvellous bizarreness is especially important to express the importance of the Fantastic in Gogol's writing. It also places the whole attention to one body part, the nose, as Poe does for the eye in "The Tell Tale Heart".

## **GOGOL'S STORIES**

"The Overcoat", "The Nose" and "The Portrait" are all stories from Gogol's collection *St Petersburg Tales*, a collection formerly known as *Arabesque*. Unlike his collection *Mirgorod* (1835) which contained stories concerned with the Ukraine and had historical and geographical viewpoints, the *St Petersburg Tales* are stories of the present world. They are filled with the fantastic like the stories in *Mirgorod*. However, the fantastic in *St Petersburg Tales* is different; it is often a twisted vision of isolated characters, rather than a rustic community infused with tradition and folklore - much like the fantastic in Pushkin's poem *The Bronze Horseman*. For Gogol the Ukraine is origin and Petersburg is career. He had doubts all his life about his own worth as an artist. There is a recurrent theme of art in the *St Petersburg Tales*, very apparent in "Nevsky Prospekt" and "The Portrait", but also in a less obvious way in "The Overcoat" (Peace, p. 94-95). One thing all the *St Petersburg Tales* have in common is strangeness.

Passing as it were through Gogol's temperament, St. Petersburg acquired a reputation of strangeness which it kept up for almost a century, losing it when it ceased to be the capital of an empire. The chief town in Russia had been built by a tyrant of genius upon a swamp, and upon the bones of slaves rotting in that swamp; this was the root of that strangeness-and the initial flaw. (Nabokov, p. 11)

## “THE OVERCOAT”

“The Overcoat” is one of Gogol’s masterpieces. It has been held up as a fundamentally realistic work, however the story can hardly be called realistic. The setting of the story is the cold city St Petersburg. The main character is a civil service employee and everything about this character is miserable and less than average. His appearance is not what you would call attractive: “a little bit pockmarked, a little bit red haired, a little bit blind in appearance” (Peace, p. 141). Akakiy Akakiyevits is a blemished, red haired, squinty-eyed man with a bald patch who quite often has rubbish hanging off his clothes or his head because he manages to be walking beneath a window at the exact moment someone throws garbage out. He doesn’t seem to take much care in his appearance since he doesn’t bother to dust the rubbish off his clothing. He is poor, yet he is not at the bottom of the civil service hierarchy. He has been at his job for a long time and is very good at it, although he isn’t driven with an ambition to advance at his job. When given the opportunity and honour of more responsibility and a higher quality piece of work he denies without giving it a second of thought (Peace, p 142).

The main character is in every way less than average (except being a very good copyist), even his name is demeaning Akakiy Akakiyevits. The Russian verb *какать* means to poop. Akakiy is so poor that he cannot afford a new winter coat without saving for a long time. His poverty can be understood as a metaphor for his lack of character. The coat becomes an obsession and replaces Akakiy’s only passion in life, his job, copying. When he finally gets the coat it affects his character. He feels like a new man when he wears it, and in fact he is treated like a different person, more respectfully. His co-workers had made fun of him and harassed him when he wore his old bathrobe-like coat. The new winter coat seems to open up possibilities in Akakiy’s life, it brings the possibility of friends, drinking, love-affairs and newfound respect. Even though the



coat brings new possibilities, it doesn't seem as though the possibilities will be Akakiy's to grasp. When he leaves the drinking meeting at a co-worker's apartment he finds his coat lying on the floor instead of on a hanger. Noticeably his coat was the only one on the floor. This gives the reader a hint that his newfound respect will not last long. On his walk home that same evening two moustached men steal the coat from Akakiy and with that his newfound respect and potential. However, Akakiy's potential for growth as a character was never very convincing (Peace, p. 143).

Akakiy talks to the police but receives no help at all. He then goes to see a person of "significance" (opposed to his own insignificance) to ask for help. The significant person insults and badgers Akakiy, he has no interest in helping this insignificant person. Some days after having been insulted, badgered and put in his place at the meeting Akakiy dies. He comes back as a ghost and gets his revenge. Rather than finding the thieves that stole his coat he takes the significant person's coat. This event mirrors Akakiy's coat and the potential it gave him. The significant person had just come from an evening of drinking and feels very different when his coat is taken. The coat seems to be more than mere clothing. It's ironic that during his life Akakiy was like a living dead, leading a life of indifference but after death he is full of life and character (Peace, p. 144-147).

The narrator of "The Overcoat" doesn't take a look into the psyche of the characters, in fact he adamantly refuses to do so. He leaves it entirely up to the reader to read into Akakiy's mind and the situations he finds himself in (Peace, p. 149). This method Gogol used is according to the realistic genre. However, the story begins unrealistically with ambiguity about what department Akakiy works in. The story builds up gradually until Akakiy finally receives his coat, but the reader knows that something will happen and as a result Akakiy will lose the coat. However, most readers probably

don't expect a ghost in this story because of the realistic elements, such as Akakiy's job and money problems. Gogol uses exaggerations and the overall mood of the story is strange, most readers probably don't know whether to laugh or cry. The below average character of Akakiy is so pitiful, alone and unlucky, most readers probably find him highly exaggerated, unrealistic, sad and humorous.

### **“THE NOSE”**

“The Nose” is a truly bizarre story. It starts with Yakovlevich, the drunken barber, and his extremely annoyed wife. Yakovlevich wakes up one morning smelling his wife's home baked bread rolls. Much to his surprise he finds a cut off nose in one of them. Throughout the story there's strange behaviour and misplaced actions. One would suspect Yakovlevich to criticize his wife for her lack of bread making skills, however it somehow turns out to be a chance for Yakovlevich's wife to scold him (Peace, p. 134). The barber speculates how the nose got into the bread but recognizes immediately whose nose it is. It belongs to Major Kovalev, who he shaves every Wednesday and Sunday. Yakovlevich throws the nose into the river Neva because he worries that he has in a drunken state cut the Major's nose off while shaving him. This, like almost everything in the story, makes no sense, how could that have happened? A barber accidentally cuts a customer's nose off and the customer doesn't notice, pays and walks out? That's completely irrational. There is no reality possible in that scenario. The story is complete fantasy.

Major Kovalev wakes up one morning with an itch to investigate a pimple on his nose. He, instead, discovers that he is missing an appendage. He doesn't feel any physical pain, however it brings him a lot of angst. Strangely he doesn't see a doctor for this ailment, instead he goes to see the police, even though there's a doctor living in the

same building. It's interesting to see that both Yakovlevich and Major Kovalev woke up due to their noses. The nose itself has an interesting and bizarre role in the story. In Yakovlevich's case the nose has been cut off, baked in an oven and thrown into the river, it's most certainly a dead object. However in Kovalev's case the nose is alive, it talks, wears clothes and goes about as a regular human being. In fact, the nose is a civil servant of a higher status than Kovalev. When Yakovlevich tosses the nose into Neva an officer confronts him, the same officer captures the nose in its form as a human being and delivers it to Kovalev wrapped in a piece of paper in its dead form. Kovalev doesn't blame Yakovlevich because he is sure that the nose was intact after his shave on Wednesday, and knows he would have felt pain if it had been cut off, in addition he is surprised that the area is healed and smooth like a pancake (Peace, p. 131-133).

Kovalev's attempts to reattach his nose prove to be unsuccessful. It takes 13 days from the finding of the nose in the bread before the nose reappears on Kovalev's face. It doesn't seem plausible that the disappearance of the nose could have been the barber's fault, nor does Kovalev blame the barber. In fact, almost immediately after the miraculous reattachment of the nose the barber goes to see Kovalev, who agrees to a shave without worry of clumsy hands, instead he worries whether the hands are clean. Kovalev believes the disappearance of his nose is somehow the work of Podtochina, a woman in his life. Kovalev is very concerned with position and title and is very insulted by the fact that his own nose is walking the streets of St Petersburg with a higher rank than he. In fact, a rank three places higher. Kovalev calls himself a major, masquerading as a man of military status even though he is a mere civil servant. In confronting his nose in a church he insists that the nose should know its place, meaning both that it should be on Kovalev's face and that it surely shouldn't be of a higher rank (Peace, p. 134-137).

Kovalev is very concerned with women and even gets distracted by one when he finally catches up to his nose and therefore loses it. Some have implied that this missing appendage might as well have been his penis. After the miraculous reattachment of Kovalev's nose he feels more confident and has no problem with pursuing women (Peace, p. 138-139). Kovalev tries to find a reasonable explanation for his loss of an appendage. Either he might be drunk or dreaming. The title нос (nose) is сон (dream) backwards, nevertheless Gogol is adamant in not explaining the story to keep its unique absurdity. The narrator seems bewildered by his own story and doesn't realize how bizarre it is until it's finished.

"[...] there is no attempt in 'The Nose' to provide any logical handle by which the reader might grasp the story's absurdity." (Peace, p. 131) The absurdities in "The Nose" are not even a realistic mirroring of the absurdities one finds in the real world. The absurdities are an imagined fantasy. "The Nose" and "The Overcoat" have similarities one cannot look past. Both stories are about a loss and regain of an object. In both cases the lack of the object means lack of possibilities for the owners, both in love affairs and career. Kovalev feels uncomfortable in pursuing women without his nose, and in much the same way Akakiy feels like opportunities arise along with his new winter coat. Kovalev sees his loss of a nose will directly affect his career chances as Akakiy with the new coat immediately receives respect and friendship from his colleagues who had been in the habit of harassing him. The difference is that Akakiy worked hard to be able to afford a new coat, it gets stolen and as a result he dies, comes back as a ghost and steals another coat. Whereas Kovalev always had his nose, loses it mysteriously for 13 days, regains it and continues his life. It's also according to the fantastic genre that in both cases the object is returned by supernatural means (Peace, p. 140).

## **“THE PORTRAIT”**

In “The Portrait” Gogol’s topic is life after death. It’s a very unrealistic story and it’s not a comic story like “The Nose” or “The Overcoat”. A young artist, Chertkov, buys a portrait with the last of his money. The portrait is of an old man with noticeable eyes. Chertkov hangs the portrait up on a wall and studies it. The portrait seems to be no longer a piece of art, but a living thing. The eyes especially seem to be human eyes carved out of the head of a person and placed into the portrait. This is so disturbing that Chertkov covers the portrait before going to sleep. He, in a state of being neither asleep nor awake, sees that the portrait is no longer covered and the old man is looking at him. Actually he seems to be looking straight through him, not only at him but also into him. The old man jumps out of the frame, pushing himself out by placing his hands on the frame. He pulls bags of money from under his sleeves. Chertkov steals one because of his money troubles, but the old man notices and takes it back. The old man advises Chertkov to stop trying to deepen his understanding of art and rather paint portraits himself.

The artist wakes up, standing in front of the portrait still seeing the old man moving within it. The artist then wakes up again, this time lying in bed looking at the portrait, seeing the old man struggling to get the cover off. And once more the artist wakes up. The reader really never knows if the story is a dream or some supernatural event, dream and reality fuse together in a frightening way. The artist himself questions his perceptions of the events of the night when he finally wakes up in the morning. He thinks the expression on the old man’s face is saying that he did in fact visit the artist during the night. When the police and landlord are about to evict Chertkov, he is miraculously provided with money. The policeman unknowingly releases a bag of money from the portrait and Chertkov grabs it. He is then without explanation provided

with clients who want a portrait painted and therefore follows the advice of the old man. Gogol explores the superficial in this story. Chertkov becomes a society painter, portraying people without knowing anything about them, their habits, passions or heart. He becomes richer yet begins his own ruin.

Chertkov realizes that he cannot paint as well as a contemporary who has studied Italian art for a living, he realizes the boundaries he has set himself. His name gives a clue to this as well *чeрta* (*cherta*) can mean line, boundary or feature, although Gogol later revised the name to *Chartkov*. Chertkov can't cross the boundaries of the superficial, he can't redeem himself from his own shallow art. He uses the money he has earned and buys and destroys all genius pieces of art he can get his hands on. This is probably a reference to Gogol's own insecurities with his own work; he repeatedly burnt his own work.

Chertkov dies with nightmares of a room filled with portraits of eyes. The idea of eyes in this story seems to be both too natural and supernatural. After Chertkov's death the portrait goes to auction. The portrait itself is a bringer of death and the description of the auction is full of funeral-like imagery. The auctioneer has a melancholic tone of voice and refers to the bidders as rapacious birds. Another artist stops the bidding on the portrait, telling everyone that the old man portrayed was a usurer who lent people money even though they had no possible means to repay him. He tells everyone that the usurer was possessed by the devil and that the money was evil. This second artist's father had been the one to portray the usurer. The usurer had wanted to live after his death, he didn't want to die completely and asked for a portrait which was accurate and life like. The artist's father achieved remarkable lifelikeness, especially in the eyes and became afraid of finishing his work. The usurer convinced him to finish so that he would be able to live on in a supernatural way. The painter later

asked his son (the second artist) to find the portrait and destroy it. When the artist finished telling everyone at the auction his story he realizes that the portrait has been stolen. And so the mystery remains.

## **POE'S STORIES**

Poe has often been called the father of the short story, though that might just be because he was among its first theorists. Poe was, during his life, mostly known as a critic. He criticised the work of his contemporary and rival, Hawthorne. Hawthorne and Poe are easily comparable, they both wrote dark Gothic tales. "Poe was always concerned with the acquiring of unity, however painfully [...]." (Poe, p. XIV)

Germany seems to pop up regularly when looking into writings of gothic or fantastic genre. In Poe's preface to *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* (1840) he claimed that 'terror is not of Germany, but of the soul' (Poe, p. XV). Poe's stories almost always look into the psyche of its characters, showing either signs of madness, melancholy or strange behaviour caused by drug or alcohol use. Poe's popular themes are death, life after death, love, pride and beauty.

## **"THE TELL TALE HEART"**

The narrator plays an important role in "The Tell Tale Heart". He is unnamed and begins his story by telling the reader he is nervous but not mad. He confesses to the reader that he killed an old man, however he wants to tell the story to support that he is in fact not mad. Because of the narrator's constant reassurance that he is not mad, more often than not the reader will suspect that he is indeed mad. His main reasoning is that the murder was committed in such a cool, relaxed and planned way that his actions cannot be considered mad. He spent time and care in preparing his criminal act by

observing the old man in his sleep every night for a week before he chose the right moment. Strangely enough he committed the murder because he feared so the old man's pale blue eye. This again suggests to the reader that he is indeed mad, for such a reason is quite crazy. On one of these sleep-observing nights, the narrator fears that the neighbours have heard the loud terrified heartbeat of the old man so somewhat carelessly he decides to commit the deed. He mutilates the corpse and hides it below the floorboards of the old man's bedroom, leaving not one blood drop in the room.

The police arrives, because a neighbour heard the old man's shriek, not heartbeat. The narrator welcomes the policemen inside and tries to appear normal. He even takes the policemen on a tour of the whole house without acting suspiciously, ending the tour in the old man's room, where he takes a chair to the exact spot of the dismembered-limbs-filled floorboards. The policemen do not suspect any ill-doing at this point as they sit and talk. Again the narrator starts to hear a heartbeat and is certain it must be the beat of the old man's heart. He panics, believing that the policemen must also hear the sound and thereby know his guilt. Driven mad by the idea that they are mocking his agony with their pleasant chatter, he confesses to the crime and shrieks at the men to rip up the floorboards.

"The Tell Tale Heart" is a story of paranoia and mental decline. The narrator's obsession with the old man's eye, heartbeat and his own sanity is central to the paranoia illustrated in the story. The narrator sees his nervousness and sensitivity as a confirmation of sanity rather than a sign of madness. The narrator is able to tell the story with accuracy, which could be a basis for believing his sanity, however his story is about a murder, which completely undermines the control he has on the narration itself. The story explores a psychological issue later developed into theory by Sigmund Freud. The issue of people harming the ones they love. The narrator loves the old man, yet



hates his vulture eye. He doesn't have a common motive for killing the old man, his motive is his compulsive fear of the old man's eye.

In the narrator's imagination he can separate the physical eye from the person of the old man, and wants to rid the old man of the "evil eye" and the burden it brings. By murdering the old man he shows how much he saw the eye as a separate part from the old man himself. When the narrator mutilates the old man he again imagines that the heart is still working and in fact working against him as the "evil eye" had done before. He is completely unable to distinguish between real and imagined sounds. The narrator is completely irrational when he is more concerned about the low sounding beating of the old man's heart when still alive than his shrieking when being killed. The police don't have a traditional role in the story. They are nice and courteous and don't represent authority or external power. Poe is more interested in the powers of the mind. As is to be anticipated the narrator's guilt and paranoia make him give himself away after having acted more and more innocent and at ease. He loses control and mistakes his own heartbeat for that of the old man's. The fact that he still doesn't recognize his own madness or himself as a villain is made clear in the end when he calls the policemen villains. The moral of the story might be that everyone feels guilt, even those who are mad and don't recognize that they're guilty.

### **"THE OVAL PORTRAIT"**

In Poe's *Philosophy of Composition* he wrote that the death of a beautiful woman was the most poetic topic (Richards, 308). This is Poe's topic in "The Oval Portrait". An essential element for the fantastic in this story is the ambiguity of narration. The story is a framed narrative and in this very short tale Poe uses two unnamed narrators. First the initial narrator of the tale and second the narrator of the book he reads.

The first narrator is vague since he is injured and confesses that he may have inaccurate perception of events. He may be delirious from pain and can simply not be trusted to give an accurate narration. He finds an abandoned mansion in which he spends the night. There's no explanation of how he has come to be wounded or why he is wandering around seeking refuge. The setting is as ambiguous as the narration. The mansion is at the same time magnificent and gloomy. The narrator admires the antique decorations of the mansion and decides that it has recently been abandoned and probably only temporarily, there is no explanation or reason given for the seemingly sudden abandonment.

The narrator discovers a book on the pillow in the room he has chosen to rest, perhaps it supernaturally got to this exact place. He reads the book until the position of the candlelight annoys him and he decides to move it. In doing so the light brings his attention to a portrait he hadn't noticed before. Strangely enough he only glances at the portrait of a young, ripening woman. He closes his eyes as if to rid himself of the delirium to be able to appreciate the portrait and examine it more carefully. He wonders if his delirium deceived him for but a moment in thinking that the girl was real, because the portrait moves him so. He remains fixated on it for an hour or so. Finally the narrator falls back into the bed in awe of the life-likeness of the portrait and looks up the portrait's number in the book to read about it.

Here Poe uses the second narrator to tell the story of the maiden of the rarest beauty. As soon as with the second sentence Poe gives the reader an idea that something bad will happen, perhaps by the hands of the painter. "And evil was the hour when she saw, and loved, and wedded the painter." (Poe, p. 209) She was married to a painter who was already in a manner of speaking married to art. Here art is supernaturally personified as another woman, a rival for the young beautiful woman. The young

woman was described as loving and gleeful, however hating her rival the art. She hates it when her husband ask to portray her, all the same obediently agrees to it and goes through the tediousness of sitting for hours on end for weeks until the portrait is finished. The painter was moody and passionate about his work, oblivious to the pain it brought his wife, however obvious it was to everyone else. She grew weaker and weaker as he grew wilder and wilder with passion for the portrait. It was as if he pulled colour from her cheeks to the canvas. With this the young woman is de-personified into the artist's palette (Richards, 309). When he finished the work he himself was pale and unsteady, maybe somewhat insane, probably from working without any meal breaks for weeks. He screams that the painting is "Life itself", looks at his wife and realizes she is dead. The representation of the woman has become more real than the actual woman. The portrait then lives on while the woman is dead; the portrait is life after death. The story has a very abrupt ending, without elaborate explanations.

## **COMPARISON**

Stories by Gogol and Poe are meant to entertain, and so they do. However, Poe's stories contain more horror and murder whereas Gogol's stories are more absurd and bizarre, and often go misunderstood. The differences are more obvious than the similarities. There are huge differences in the stories, however there also are many things that are very much alike. Both writers were greatly influenced by German folk tales and their stories bear witness to that. Folktales were usually mythical stories that generally didn't have much to do with reality. All the stories compared here don't have much to do with reality, except for "The Tell Tale Heart", which unfortunately could very well have happened.

The stories compared here have common entities or themes, such as policemen, ambiguous narrators, loss and gain, obsessions, art, attention to specific body parts. Vampirism is apparent in “The Portrait” and “The Oval Portrait”. “The Overcoat” and “The Tell Tale Heart” deal with obsessions, with either a winter coat or an evil eye. Eyes are a central idea in both “The Portrait” and “The Tell Tale Heart”, even more the eyes seem to have a life on their own and seem to somehow be evil. The eyes are dead objects that have come alive, similar to Major Kovalev’s nose (though not quite as literally). Madness plays a big part in Poe’s stories whereas dreams are more important in these stories by Gogol, however, Gogol has used the serious theme of madness in his stories, for example in his short story “The Diary of a Madman”. “[...] it bears the recognisable Gogolian stamp of ‘laughter through tears’. Laughter, which treats madness as comic [...]” (Peace, p. 125). Gogol evokes the same feeling when reading about poor Akakiy as the reader often does not know whether to weep or laugh.

The mood of the stories is quite different, most readers get a feeling of overwhelming strangeness when reading these stories by Gogol, but get a feeling of something horrifying in Poe’s stories. Choice of words matters most to set the mood, Poe uses such words as evil, nervous, mad, moody, hideous, gloomy, making the mood very dark and horrifying. Instead Gogol for instance repeats his character’s name in “The Overcoat” which is the word children use for excrement, Gogol’s description of Akakiy’s physical appearance also gives a comical, exaggerated mood. The mood in Gogol’s story “The Portrait” is more dark and gloomy like the Poe’s stories than “The Overcoat” or “The Nose”.

Character creation is handled differently in these stories. Gogol realistically describes his characters’ physical appearance, gives them names, jobs and wives. This doesn’t mean that the stories are realistic, the fantastic plot and supernatural events

completely take over. The realistic description is indeed realistic yet exaggerated. Poe on the other hand doesn't give his characters names or physical descriptions. He however follows romanticism in looking into the characters' psychology, or at least giving it attention. Gogol completely refrains from peeking into his characters' psychology.

It's important to look at the narrator when establishing into which genre a story fits. Fantastic narrators are usually those we cannot trust to be telling the truth or those who may have perceived events differently due to alcohol or other interferences with the sober mind. "The Tell Tale Heart" has a first person ambiguous narrator, he so adamantly tries to prove that he is not mad, that it's impossible to think he is sane. "The Oval Portrait" has two narrators; the first one is delirious from an injury that is not explained at all. The second one is unidentified, he could have been the young girl's father, mother or someone secretly in love with her, angered by the fact that she was dead and therefore his narration is coloured by the anger. In "The Overcoat" there's an omniscience third person narrator who is very ambiguous about which town and in which department the story took place. He seems to know the details, but is unwilling to give them. Other details he willingly gives, e.g. the name and status of the protagonist. The narrator in "The Nose" is also an omniscience third person narrator. The setting is the same in all the stories by Gogol, St Petersburg. Poe doesn't reveal any city, town or even country for his setting and in both stories the whole plot unfolds in a single building.

## **CONCLUSION**

The five stories compared here have similar elements such as life after death, policemen, ambiguous narrators, loss and gain, obsessions, art and attention to specific

body parts. The differences, however, are mostly in the mood of the stories, narration and the fact that one uses realistic elements and the other doesn't. The narration is usually an omniscient third person in the stories chosen by Gogol, whereas in the stories by Poe there is usually a first person narrator.

All of the stories are meant to entertain, though in a different way, Poe's stories are more horrifying and Gogol's more comical. The mood is therefore usually darker in Poe's stories, though "The Portrait" by Gogol does have a similar feeling of evil and horror as "The Tell Tale Heart" and "The Oval Portrait". Gogol gives his characters names and jobs and a seemingly real life, in his stories there is a definite critique on society, although it is quite possible to enjoy reading them without reading into the social critique.

These two contemporary writers from very different countries were born in the same year and were both influenced by German folktales. They didn't have similar upbringings or family situations. Life in Russia and in the United States must have been very different at that time, as different as it is today. However, the fact is that both these authors lived for a period of time in Western Europe and they were influenced by the same mythical folk stories and both belong to the Romantic era.

As stated before Poe is indisputably regarded a Gothic writer, however, maybe that's a far too general categorization for his stories. "The Tell Tale Heart" and "The Oval Portrait" are short stories that can easily be described as Fantasy writing. The ambiguous narrator is either pain induced or mad. "The Tell Tale Heart" has an eye that seems alive and evil and "The Oval Portrait" has a girl whose life is drawn from her to a portrait. The difference in Poe's fantastic stories and Gogol's is mainly the fact that Gogol uses realistic descriptions of work, wives etc. Even though Poe's "The Tell Tale Heart" could possibly have happened in real life he doesn't use any realistic

descriptions in the story. Both authors' trademarks are entertainment and mystification, which is apparent in all these wonderfully imaginative stories.

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