

## Sample Section A response: *The Diary of a Madman*

**Author:** Nikolay Gogol

**Genre:** 19th-century short stories

**Perspective used:** Marxist

**Other approaches:** feminist, New Historicist

**Topic:** Consider the proposition that the pursuit of higher rank is ultimately a futile endeavour for the characters in Gogol's stories.

- 1 Outlines the literary perspective – Karl Marx's theory of alienation – that will inform the analysis of the text, in relation to the topic.
- 2 Provides specific examples from the text to support the Marxist interpretation.
- 3 Agrees with the topic's proposition that pursuit of higher rank is a futile endeavour but allows for a more nuanced analysis to occur by acknowledging that, though futile, the pursuit is unavoidable in a class-divided society.
- 4 Using an example from the text as a springboard, the essay explores the importance of rank – a key term in the topic – in nineteenth-century Russia.

Holding high rank in 19th-century Russia is depicted as the epitome of existence in Gogol's *The Diary of a Madman*, *The Government Inspector* and *Selected Stories*. The unrelenting force that compels the characters in these stories to advance their rank and social status – and by extension their perceived power and influence over others – is depicted as pervasive in Gogol's Russia. Characters in 'Nevsky Prospekt', for instance, have vastly different interpretations of the role that rank and social standing should play, but their lives are nevertheless powerfully shaped and constrained by the alienating nature of class divisions. Marx's theory of alienation suggests that such rigid class divisions invariably lead to antagonism between individuals, which in turn alienates the individual from their fellow human. **1** Such is the case in 'The Overcoat', in which Akaky Akakievich endures 'the mockery of his colleagues', perhaps for outwardly displaying an aversion to the pursuit of a higher position; and in the titular madman's demeaning reproach to a subordinate, 'Don't you know, ignorant peasant, that I am a civil servant and of noble birth?' **2** Ostensibly, the pursuit of higher rank can be regarded as a futile endeavour that fosters rivalry and pomposity, and endows a false sense of superiority. Regardless of its futile nature, though, the continual pursuit of higher rank is an intrinsic characteristic of a class-divided society and, as such, cannot be ignored or expunged. **3**

The idea that high rank and social status beget power and authority is a somewhat illusory concept for the characters in Gogol's stories. In 'Nevsky Prospekt', for example, Lieutenant Pirogov attempts to exploit his army rank, 'to which he had been recently promoted and ... deep down ... was secretly flattered by', in order to woo a married woman. We can extrapolate the views expressed by Pirogov to better understand the complexities and preoccupations of 19th-century Russia. Within this particular social, cultural and historical context, rank is regarded as the barometer of one's worth in society. **4** It is quite understandable then that Pirogov, unable to lure the married

woman away from her husband, would fail 'to understand how anyone could resist him, especially as his ... distinguished rank entitled him to full recognition'. The illusion that high rank grants its holder supremacy over subalterns is based predominantly on this notion of entitlement, which Gogol depicts as a meaningless by-product of a class-divided society, and which detracts from what he perceives to be truly important: human connection. **5** Pirogov is adamant that his rank, being greater than that of Schiller, a mere tinsmith, entitles him to the German's wife, irrespective of the fact that she 'had so obviously rebuffed him'. While Pirogov is justifiably punished for presupposing that his high rank merits acquiescence from those of a lower station, he does not change his ostentatious behaviour. **6** Rather than disregarding rank and creating authentic connections with his fellow citizens, he responds to the perceived slight against his station by confining his social circle to 'civil servants and officers from his regiment'. The text is perhaps suggesting that estrangement is not all-encompassing, but is instead limited to the divisions imposed by the class hierarchy. **7**

The mere notion of high rank – the way it is perceived and glorified – exerts an influential, constraining hold on 'the kind of society to which Pirogov belonged'. Citizens of this society recognise the social convention of respecting those of high social standing, with merchants 'most reluctant to see their daughters married to anyone except a general, or at least a *colonel*' – notably, there is no rationale given for this other than what convention dictates. This system, whereby one's worth is dictated by rank alone, invariably creates a tension between the high and low classes, instilling within those who have higher rank a disdain for those perceived to be lesser than themselves: Pirogov 'gave him to understand ... that a *lieutenant* was standing before him and not a common or garden officer'. **8** This behaviour, commonplace in Gogol's tales, gives credence to the pursuit of high rank and to the inveterate desire to extricate oneself from what is considered a base existence. Yet it also, concurrently, suggests that such an endeavour rarely results in greater happiness or comfort, and only exacerbates a sense of disconnection from one's fellow citizens, proving ultimately to be a futile pursuit. **9**

Relatedly, we see how one individual's attempt to live outside the boundaries of a society divided by class is thwarted by the subsuming culture. **10** In a parallel story line in 'Nevsky Prospekt', Gogol observes the uniqueness of such an individual, who 'belong[s] to the class which constitutes a rather strange phenomenon'. Rather than submit to the dominant culture's

- 5** Identifies the author's views and values; suggests that, as opposed to the futility of seeking high rank, human connection is the true meaningful value espoused by Gogol. This idea is further explored at the conclusion of the paragraph, tying the discussion into a critique of class division and alienation.
- 6** Sophisticated language ('ostentatious', 'acquiescence') and clear, expressive language contribute to the response being 'coherent, detailed and highly expressive' (expected quality for a high-level response).
- 7** Phrases such as 'not all-encompassing, but instead limited' show that the topic is complex and requires more than a simple yes or no answer to the proposition.
- 8** Quotations are employed with direct reference to an idea, linking textual detail with the overarching discussion of wider views and values.
- 9** The paragraph's concluding sentence reiterates the main contention.
- 10** Topic sentence clearly introduces a new idea related to the main contention.



- 11 Explores another facet of Marx's theory of alienation – the concept of 'species being' – that is directly applicable to one of Gogol's characters.
- 12 Links the views and values of the author to the Marxist concept of species being.
- 13 Use of metalanguage and a sophisticated vocabulary ('paradoxical', 'encapsulates', 'extrapolate', 'axiomatically') throughout the essay enables a precise and complex analysis.
- 14 States the views and values of the author and further develops the interpretation.
- 15 Refers to the views of a Marxist scholar (Ernst Fischer), broadening the use of the literary perspective; quotes from (and provides title of) one of Fischer's key texts on the subject.



ideals of high rank and social standing, Piskarev chooses to follow his 'species being' and perform his work as an artist with devotion and 'genuine enjoyment'. Coined by Marx, the phrase 'species being' encapsulates the idea that our humanness is dependent on our ability to consciously shape the world around us through the work we perform; according to Marx, alienation from our species being divests us of our humanity. 11 When Piskarev is mocked for following his life's passion – he is brutally rejected by a woman of high class for suggesting that they live and work in poverty together – his spirit is ruptured and 'his lifeless body' is soon found 'with the throat cut'. Piskarev's demise can be read as a withering critique of Russian society: Gogol suggests that a society that idealises a segregated populace axiomatically precludes one such as Piskarev from achieving his species being. 12 Citizens of such a society are instead presented with an ultimatum: participate in forced (and largely meaningless) labour, such as administrative work for the civil service, in order to advance your rank and social standing, or 'be one's own master' and live in seclusion.

Gogol's account of high rank and its role in Russian society is at times nuanced, at times paradoxical. 13 Though high rank is a pervasive notion in this society, it is simultaneously depicted as transient for some of Gogol's characters. Akaky Akakievich in 'The Overcoat' sees his spurned existence, in which 'no one showed him the least respect', as momentarily uplifted by the purchase of a new overcoat, a symbol of wealth and status. However, this facade can only conceal Akaky's true station in life – 'as for his rank in the civil service ... he belonged to the species known as eternal titular counsellor' – for so long. His colleagues, after initially overwhelming him 'with congratulations', inevitably 'abandoned him, overcoat included', as the artificially constructed perception of importance waned. Gogol suggests that one's social standing is an almost tangible quality, and cannot be concealed: rank will always define one person's worth in relation to another's. 14 In *How to Read Karl Marx*, Marxist scholar Ernst Fischer contends that we do not see each other 'as fellow-men having equal rights, but as superiors and subordinates, as holders of a rank'. 15 Akaky's death is depicted as a consequence of this ideology, which absolutely predetermines the estrangement that arises from a fractious system.

Paradoxically, then, the pursuit of higher rank is both futile and necessary for the characters inhabiting Gogol's Russia. These characters are constrained by the demands of a society that delineates each individual's worth on the basis of rank,

obligating them to participate in a ritual of competition and enmity: 'just you wait, my friend, until I'm a colonel, or even something higher, God willing. I'll acquire more status than *you*'. Ultimately, the collected stories are an indictment of a system that deprives individuals of their species being and fosters division and alienation between all members of a society. 16

16 Sums up the contention of the essay and finishes with an overview of the text that responds to the topic.

### Guiding comments

This essay employs a **Marxist approach** to read Gogol's stories as a critique of a society divided by class, resulting in rank and social standing being regarded as the determinants of one's worth in that society. While Marxist interpretations focus predominantly on the plight of workers, there are other facets of this perspective (spanning economic, philosophical and sociological aspects) that can be used in the analysis of a text, such as the theory of alienation and the concept of species being.

Examining the text through Marx's theory of alienation enables this response to observe how class divisions and struggles affect relationships between characters: for example, Akaky Akakievich and his colleagues in the civil service; Piskarev and his contemptuous love interest; and Pirogov and the tinsmith. In each of these instances, class divisions can be seen to deny the possibility of authentic human connection.

The sociological lens of alienation also reveals greater truths about the society portrayed by Gogol: namely, that high rank – despite the recognition and respect that it confers – is an innately isolating position to hold.

### Other approaches

This topic could also be approached through a **feminist lens**, which would lead to an exploration of characters based on their gender and on the social and cultural norms of gendered identity.

There are few female characters in Gogol's stories, and those that do appear are often depicted as one-dimensional and uninteresting. In addition, they are rarely given an independent voice – they are only ever referred to by the male protagonists or the narrator, often in an unflattering light; 'ladies are least of all to be trusted', the narrator tells us in 'Nevsky Prospekt', suggesting that women are unable to recount events in a truthful and unbiased manner.

In relation to the topic, the independent pursuit of higher rank is not even a possibility for the female characters, who would have been precluded from joining both the army and the civil service. Social standing for women in nineteenth-century Russia was instead determined by lineage or marriage. You could argue that women in this historical context were forced to pursue higher rank and social standing through the act and pursuit of marriage, as is evidenced in 'Ivan Fyodorovich

Shponka and His Aunt'. Aunt Vasilisa Kashporovna desires the land owned by Grigory Grigoryevich Storchenko (believing that it belongs to her nephew's family) and hatches a plot to obtain the land by marrying her nephew to one of Storchenko's sisters. Unable to achieve rank and wealth herself, Aunt Vasilisa manipulates those around her (including her nephew) so that her family's wealth and importance can grow. The avenues for women to exert control are perceptibly limited, and thus require 'a woman ... to be twenty times cleverer than her husband', or any man for that matter, in order to affect the social order around them.

It is likely that a feminist reading would, at least to some degree, be critical of Gogol's depiction of women, specifically for their lack of agency and their inability to voice a protest against the patriarchal mechanisms (such as rank) that oppress them. Of course, these features largely reflect the structure and conventions of the society, but Gogol does not challenge this by giving his female characters the intellectual or emotional qualities that suggest they deserve more opportunities in life.

Given the period in which the text is set (and was written), a **New Historicist perspective** could offer interesting insights into the topic. A New Historicist analysis of Gogol's stories would examine both how Gogol's historical context may have shaped his work and how the work reflects Gogol's historical context.

A New Historicist analysis would likely disagree with the proposition that pursuit of higher rank is a futile endeavour. You could argue that high rank was one of the only indicators of achievement in nineteenth-century Russia and that it gave people something to strive toward, as Ivan Fyodorovich shows us with his promotion to lieutenant: 'he drilled his platoon so well that the Company Commander always set him up as a shining example to the rest'. The dedication that goes into achieving high rank is depicted as a commendable effort that should be met with praise.

From this perspective, Gogol's stories suggest that the pursuit of higher rank might be fraught, but that it was nevertheless a vital source of meaning and purpose in lives that were otherwise largely circumscribed.

Alternatively, you could explore the idea that, while pursuing high rank is a necessary and sometimes admirable practice, it can also lead to conceit, a character trait that would have been deemed objectionable in nineteenth-century Russia. That Kovalyov (in 'The Nose') calls himself 'Major' (instead of collegiate assessor) to 'make himself sound more important and to give more weight and nobility to his status' is a disagreeable quality that sheds a negative light on high rank and its potential for self-aggrandisement.

## References

Fischer, E, Marek, F & Foster, JB 1997, *How to Read Karl Marx*, Monthly Review Press, New York.

Gogol, N 2005, *The Diary of a Madman, The Government Inspector and Selected Stories*, trans. Ronald Wilks, Penguin Classics, London.