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Dead Souls

Nikolai Gogol · *1842 · D. J. Hogarth translation (1915)*

Chichikov, a plausible and well-mannered middle-aged official, arrives in a provincial Russian town and sets out to buy from landowners the names of serfs who have died since the last census. In imperial Russia a landowner still paid tax on those names and could mortgage them, and Chichikov has a plan. Gogol's 'poem' is a comic tour of provincial types, the first great Russian novel.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What does it say about a society that a man can profit by buying the names of the dead, and what kind of people does he find on the way?

Gogol draws the landowners as types: Manilov, who agrees to everything; Korobotchka, who is suspicious; Nozdrev, who cheats; Sobakevitch, who bargains like a butcher; and Plushkin, a miser. Each is funny and each is a portrait of a failing. The town's panic when Chichikov's plan leaks out shows that the officials are as foolish as the landowners. The book ends with a famous passage of the troika and the question of where Russia is going.

KEY CHARACTERS

Paul Ivanovitch Chichikov
The traveler who buys dead souls.

Manilov
A sentimental landowner.

Madame Korobotchka
A slow and suspicious widow.

Nozdrev
A boaster, gambler, and cheat.

Sobakevitch
A hard bargainer.

Plushkin
A miser in rags.

Grades 10–12

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01

Arrival and the First Calls

CHAPTERS I–II

Chichikov arrives at a provincial town, courts the officials, and calls on the landowner Manilov, to whom he first proposes buying the dead serfs. Manilov agrees and gives them away.

- Chichikov is described in a way that gives away little.
- Manilov's sentimentality is a comic portrait.
- The offer is made as a delicate favor.

02

The Landowners

CHAPTERS III–VI

Korobotchka is slow and suspicious, Nozdrev cheats and brawls, Sobakevitch bargains like a butcher, and Plushkin is a miser in rags. Chichikov leaves each with a list of dead names.

- Each landowner is a type and a joke.
- Nozdrev is the most dangerous.
- Plushkin's decay is the book's darkest portrait.

03

The Town and the Gossip

CHAPTERS VII–X

Back in town, Chichikov registers his purchases and is courted as a rich man. Then the scandal spreads that he is a forger, a spy, or even Napoleon in disguise, and the officials are paralyzed by fear.

- The town's officials are eager to flatter.
- Rumor grows faster than fact.
- The panic is a satire of the whole provincial order.

04

The Life of Chichikov

CHAPTER XI

Gogol tells Chichikov's history, his father's advice about the kopek, his rise through petty offices, and his schemes. The book ends with the troika passage.

- The father's advice shapes his whole career.
- His schemes are all about small gains.
- The troika image is the book's great flourish.

05

Part II Fragments

PART II (SURVIVING FRAGMENT)

The surviving fragments show Chichikov among better landlords and a ruined man, with a first attempt to describe a more serious and hopeful Russia.

- Gogol burned most of this part.
- The fragments hint at a change of tone.
- The book remains unfinished.

Satire · Money and Greed · Russia · Illusion

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 10–12

1. Notice how each landowner is introduced by his house and manner.
2. The idea of 'dead souls' is both a legal trick and an image. Ask what it means.
3. Gogol often speaks to the reader in his own voice. Notice those moments.
4. The book is unfinished. Think about what the last pages leave open.

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