The Inspector-General

Nikolai Gogol · *1836 · Thomas Seltzer translation (1916)*

In a remote provincial Russian town, the Governor calls together the judge, the superintendent of charities, the inspector of schools, the postmaster, and the doctor to tell them that a secret Inspector-General is coming from St. Petersburg. A penniless young man at the inn is taken for the Inspector, and the whole town falls over itself to bribe and please him. Gogol's comedy is the founding comedy of the Russian stage.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What does a town reveal about itself when it thinks the law is watching?

The officials are all corrupt, and each is afraid. Khlestakov, a hungry clerk, is slow to see that he has been mistaken for an inspector, and then he plays the part with ease. He takes bribes, boasts of his connections, and proposes to the Governor's daughter. The play ends with a letter that exposes the town, and a gendarme announces that the real Inspector has arrived. Gogol's moral is plain and funny, and the last silent tableau is famous.

KEY CHARACTERS

Anton Antonovich, the Governor
The corrupt head of the town.

Ivan Khlestakov
A penniless clerk taken for the Inspector.

Osip
Khlestakov's servant.

Anna Andreyevna
The Governor's wife.

Marya
The Governor's daughter.

Bobchinsky and Dobchinsky
Two gossips who start the rumor.

Grades 9–12

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01

The News and the Panic

ACT I

The Governor announces that a secret Inspector is coming. The officials list their shortcomings, and two gossips announce that a young man at the inn must be he.

- The Governor's opening words are the play's great start.
- The officials' sins are many and petty.
- Bobchinsky and Dobchinsky are a comic pair.

02

Khlestakov at the Inn

ACT II

Khlestakov, hungry and penniless, is overcome with anxiety when the Governor visits. The two men misunderstand one another in a long scene of mutual alarm, and Khlestakov is invited to stay at the Governor's house.

- Each man thinks the other is the threat.
- Khlestakov is not a schemer, only a liar of the moment.
- The invitation is the Governor's mistake.

03

The Great Man's Dinner

ACT III

Khlestakov is treated as a great man at the Governor's house, boasts of his connections in the capital, and begins to enjoy the role.

- Khlestakov's boasting grows more extravagant.
- The officials believe every word.
- His servant Osip sees the danger.

04

Bribes and Flirtation

ACT IV

Khlestakov accepts bribes and loans from each official in turn, and flirts with the Governor's wife and daughter.

- The bribes are shown one at a time.
- Khlestakov is amused and a little surprised.
- The Governor's family hope for a great match.

05

The Proposal and the Letter

ACT V

Khlestakov proposes to Marya and leaves. The postmaster reads aloud a letter in which Khlestakov mocks the whole town. The Governor rages, and a gendarme announces that the real Inspector has arrived.

- The proposal is a comic scene of hope.
- The letter exposes the town.
- The real Inspector's arrival ends the play.

Corruption · Fear · Vanity · Mistaken Identity

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 9–12

1. Notice how the officials respond when they think someone is watching.
2. Khlestakov never claims to be the Inspector. Ask how the mistake grows.
3. The letter in Act V is the play's key. Ask what it reveals.
4. Look at the play's last moments. What does Gogol want the audience to feel?

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