

# Critique on Nikolai Gogol's *The Nose*

Anika Elema

Global Maritime Archaeology, University of Malta, Msida, Malta

Email: anika.elema.22@um.edu.mt

**How to cite this paper:** Elema, A. (2025). Critique on Nikolai Gogol's *The Nose*. *Advances in Literary Study*, 13, 251-256. <https://doi.org/10.4236/als.2025.134017>

**Received:** June 9, 2025

**Accepted:** September 26, 2025

**Published:** September 29, 2025

Copyright © 2025 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

## Abstract

This paper challenges traditional interpretations of Nikolai Gogol's *The Nose* as a political or socio-economic metaphor. Instead, it argues that the story should be understood and appreciated as a purely absurdist work—one that does not seek to convey hidden meanings or critiques, but rather exists for the sake of absurdity itself. The literature studied in this context is not in the language of the studied writer—Gogol was a Ukrainian writer who wrote in Russian. As a result, this work incorporates Russian literature. This is utilized to substantiate the main arguments, including the presence of defamiliarization in his absurdist works and absurdity existing for absurdities sake.

## Keywords

Contrarian View, Absurdity, Illogicality, Dream-Like, Perspective, Presuppositions

## 1. Introduction

Ambiguity is a literary device that is often overlooked during the process of literary analysis. The idea that all texts are metaphors for something is exactly the ideology that will be challenged throughout this paper. *The Nose*, an absurdist text written by Nikolai Gogol in 1836, has been taken under the process of analytic and rigorous analysis. This short story has been thought of as a type of critique on Russia's social hierarchy—a line of thought revisited in 2023 by philosopher and critical theorist David Bell (SubStance Journal). Shukman (1989) places the absurdity of *The Nose* within the satire of the system of officialdom and bureaucracy. Despite the validity of this claim, the purpose of this paper is to question just that, to say that this text is not a metaphor, but is rather simply a text in itself. Gogol, at least for this short story, did not intend to write a political critique or a piece of fiction that was meant to be analyzed to death. Instead, the purpose of writing this text was simply to push forward the idea of absurdity. Yet the simplicity of absurdity is lost in the scholarly analysis forced upon this text. Therefore, one could

claim that *The Nose* is simply an absurd piece of fiction. Were it to be in another language or context, the absurdist text would lose meaning (Shukman, 1989). Though it exists enveloped in sociopolitical factors and power structures of the Russian Empire, and can be argued to be a take on its environment, it remains an absurdist piece.

This article begins by challenging traditional interpretations of Gogol's *The Nose* as a socio-political critique, instead proposing that the story should be read as pure absurdism. It first presents a contrarian view that embraces the nonsensical nature of the text, followed by an exploration of absurdity, illogicality, and the dream-like quality of the narrative. The argument continues by connecting Gogol's style to surrealism and Ukrainian folklore, emphasizing his use of defamiliarization. The paper then highlights Gogol's own dismissal of deeper meaning in the story, reinforcing the idea that *The Nose* exists simply to be absurd. It concludes by questioning critical presuppositions and advocating for the acceptance of absurdist literature on its own terms.

## 2. A Contrarian View

The claim that *The Nose* is utterly absurd is one that seems to be a contrarian view of the analysis previously made, that is, rejecting or opposing popular opinion or current practice. Although this may be true in its own right, I would assert that a contrarian view as such is exactly what is needed in a community of scholars who, in the search for the meanings in text, lose the text itself. Simon Karlinsky, a critic of Gogol's, seemed to agree with this idea of absurdity. At the end of his critique of *The Nose*, he claimed that any attempt to contextualize the story as a sexual joke or a social satire makes the story something as useless as "very small potatoes" (Karlinsky, 1992: p. 130). This is Karlinsky's attempt to say that, as a social satire or sexual joke, the story begins to lose its purpose, contrasting the position that it satirizes the Russian social status (Abdalqader Abu Jweid et al., 2015). Whilst in comparison to the story being a social satire, Karlinsky claims, "As a vision of the surreal within the ordinary, as a revelation of metaphysical absurdity, as the piece of magnificently inspired nonsense it really is, it is beyond compare" (Karlinsky, 1992: p. 130). Mirsky (1999) repeats this idea of nonsense in his interpretation in *A History of Russian Literature* (1926): "a piece of sheer play, almost sheer nonsense" (p. 155). To go even further, one could claim that in attempts to contextualize something, one begins to lose the meaning of just what that something really is, and one should let that something exist as it was intended to exist. In reference to *The Nose*, this takes the form of the fact that the story is set in the realm of the absurd. One could also argue that *The Nose* exists in a surrealistic space in which anything can take form and, although unexpected and a little odd, can still be understood in the context of all else that is absurd.

## 3. Absurdity

*The Nose* is a text which can be categorized as simply absurd. When there is men-

tion of absurdity throughout this paper, we are speaking of absurdity to mean preposterous. Encompassing the illogical, unreasonable or inappropriate, it exists in a state or category of being utterly ridiculous. Gogol's works served as a forerunner in absurdism, according to Russian novelist, theorist, and literary critic (Bely, 1934). Though there is always some benefit to the process of literary analysis that exists within the community of scholars, there is something to be said about the process of overanalysis. The simplicity that makes up this short story can be lost in the search for greater meanings. This text offers a dreamlike narrative, in which there is rarely closure and hardly ever a sense of accomplishment. Instead, there is simply a puzzling plot and a confusing narrative. "The tale of *The Nose* begins in a perfectly prosaic manner, with exact information about the date, the time, and the place of the events to be described" (Karlinsky, 1992: p. 125). The audience starts this narrative in the presence of Ivan Yakovlevich. As we follow Ivan, the story begins to become progressively more and more ludicrous. This I found quite odd, as, with most stories, the more information we are given, the better we can understand the plot and narrative presented. Yet in *The Nose*, it seems as though the more information we are given, the more baffled the audience becomes.

In *The Nose*, the loss of this facial feature jeopardizes a vain identity. The emphasis on how one looks is again present in his work, *The Overcoat*. Similar in absurdity and proto-surrealist qualities, the prominent focus on appearance is present in the main character's coworkers. Surrealism, a movement that experimented with the new mode of expression, automatism, had the intention to release the unrestrained imagination of the subconscious. Proto-surrealism is then the study of mediums that relate, reference, or share similarities to surrealism. This juxtaposition between *The Nose* and *The Overcoat* demonstrates the link between absurdity and perception. In *The Overcoat*, it is seen internally, in the coworkers' perceptions of themselves, as well as projections manifesting as a critique of the main character's outward appearance. Gogol uses defamiliarization in the sense that he approaches common, regular items in a bizarre or unknown method, thus provoking a new perspective within the reader. The presence of this technique is supported by Viktor Shklovsky, a Russian and Soviet theorist and author associated with Russian formalism (Shklovsky, 1970). The historiography of the issue in this article, being that it contrasts the intensive analysis of prior approaches, includes Bell's approach, which concludes in a surreal style (Bell, 2023).

#### 4. Illogicality

Although the story spirals down into absurdity almost as soon as Ivan comes into contact with *The Nose*, a leading factor for the overwhelming absurdity that is *The Nose* is due to the main character, Major Kovalyov. Major Kovalyov, who is not truly a major but, rather, as Gogol points out, a collegiate assessor: "He had held this rank for only two years, and therefore could not forget it for a moment;

and to give himself more nobility and weight, he never referred to himself as a collegiate assessor, but always as a major” (p. 305). *The Nose* with no mind is itself a higher-ranking official than a body and mind with no nose. The argument for absurdity in relation to “Major” Kovalyov is simply this: illogicality—lacking clarity, sense, or reasoning—supposes a disconnection between premises. Though at this point in the story, the audience is simply beginning to get to know him as a character, there is a disconnection between the character and the title. The absurdity lies in the fact that he has a want for power, a want for some sort of higher authority, which, as the audience finds out later, is what Major Kovalyov pines after. Yet, he, in theory, is already giving himself this ability by simply self-instantiating his preferred title into existence, which starts to lead the audience down a rabbit-hole of misconceptualizing his want for power and his hold on it.

### 5. Dream-Like States

Let us not forget the style in which this story is written. Gogol has written this story, as with *The Overcoat*, in a bizarre narrative-prose type style. The style in which this story was presented is one which is, albeit confusing, can be seen as another attempt to show just how absurd this story is. The type of narrative is one which allows for some omniscient third party to understand what is happening and then explain it to the audience. Although it is a style used in many modern works, I would argue that this style is an attempt to confuse the audience. Or, going even further, one could argue that the purpose of this may be to induce the audience to feel as though they are a part of this dream-like state in which Kovalyov exists. It is dream-like in the sense that it resembles a series of sensations, thoughts, and images occurring in a person’s mind while asleep. The narration provided causes a disruption from the prose and the plot; it causes the reader to feel as though they are being pulled out of a dream to be reminded that they are in one to begin with. Gogol knows this and strategically adds his opinions on the characters presented within the story. Frequently, this was done by adding the narration at the beginning of the sections within the story. This allows for the audience, though existing in a state of confusion, to understand that there is a sort of mist causing the scenes to end and a narrative to bring the story “back to life”. This feeling seems to be mimicking a dream-like state, but more specifically seems to be mimicking the feeling of waking up within a dream. This is an almost inceptive type of state in which one loses their perceptions of reality and comprehension of what they understand to be true. One could also argue that our dreams are a reflection of experiences in our waking life. This, of course, is a reference to the absolute absurdity which Gogol is attempting to present. The original title of the work, being *Son* (dream), and changed to its palindrome, *Nos* (nose), hints toward this dreamscape reality. As the main character wakes up from his dream, he proves its absurdity.

Drawing on the Ukrainian folklore that was an integral part of his upbringing inspired and enhanced the vivid and mystical nature of his characters (Gogol,

2024). Fantastical elements are thus expressed through his texts. As a folklorist, he draws upon ancient techniques from the era of ethno-cultural interaction of the Slavs of the Northern Black Sea region with Iranian-speaking Scythian and Sarmatian tribes. Ukrainian folklore fables, called *nebylytsi*, incorporate dreams and humorous stories with absurd and surreal qualities. In reference to an entity in Ukrainian folklore, the Head of the Department of European Studies of The Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, Alexander Novik, wrote, “There is every reason to suppose that the mythological character is traditionally associated with humiliation, pranks and intrigues against people” (p. 263). This aspect of humiliation is seen in *The Nose* as well as in *The Overcoat*.

The use of dreams, visionary subjects, and fantastical elements is not isolated to *The Nose* in Gogol’s work: in *The Overcoat*, near the main character’s death, he is delirious and imagines himself in another time and place. This is seen further in his work *Viy*, as one of the characters envisions himself in motion when he is still. [Karlinsky \(1967\)](#) describes the interconnection among surrealistic imagery and dreams, the subconscious, and delirium. As the reasoning and logicity in dreams are often surreal, this link is strengthened.

## 6. A change of Perspective

The ending of the story offers Gogol’s perspective on the story, in which Gogol explains that there is simply no meaning to the tale. This perspective, that is, his attitude or regard towards the subject, elaborates his point of view. He offers an almost perverse way of saying that there is an alternative meaning to the text, or as he says, “Say what you like, but such incidents do happen in the world—rarely, but they do happen” (p. 326). Although one might be tempted to say that Gogol is hinting at the audience, however slyly, that there is a meaning to this text that shall be interpreted, he is also saying what he is simply saying, which is that situations such as this absurd one presented do happen and that their happening should be observed. Also, Gogol contextualizes the story in relation to the “fatherland” by saying, “In the first place, there is decidedly no benefit to the fatherland; in the second place. but in the second place there is also no benefit. I simply do not know what it is” (pp. 325-326), which, again, supports the fact that this is an absurd text and should simply exist as such. Gogol is saying here that there is no benefit to the fatherland presented in this text. When in relation to Russia and another one of Gogol’s short stories like *The Overcoat*, there is a clear and almost explicit socio-political critique; yet, with *The Nose*, there is no such critique, there is only the text and its absurd existence.

## 7. Presuppositions

Let us not forget that, with absurdity, one is not trying to insinuate the loss of purpose or of meaning, or even to say that all previous analyses of this text are pointless. Quite the opposite, rather; one must understand that what is being argued are the presuppositions—tacit assumptions prior to the start of a course of

action or argument—that almost all critiques of *The Nose* seem to be. It appears as though all scholars and analysts seem to want to have the instantaneous assumption that there are several alternative meanings to pieces of work. And yet, there must be the understanding that sometimes texts are written simply for the fact that the author wished to bring the piece into existence. That, sometimes, for a piece of fiction to be created, there must not always be some sort of critique on something being presented. Also, if there is to be conversation surrounding absurd texts like the one presented, then there should also be the understanding that they were written to exist as absurd and, thereby, should be treated as such.

## 8. Conclusion

Gogol has presented an absurdist text that offers an incredibly interesting, confusing piece of fiction; this is arguably only in existence and only revered for such, for the fact that it is almost entirely absurd. For the fact that, in reading it, one becomes lost and confused, following a path of absurdity which inevitably leads to confusion, and, as most know, confusion is often the cause for scholarly debate and inference. The want for meaning has taken a text that can and should simply be observed for its absurdity and turned it into a text written for the purposes of social satire. As lively as Gogol's pieces of fiction may be, one should not assume the purpose behind Gogol's subject of a walking nose. Each interpretation has its own degree of assumption and arguability. So, as a community of scholars, there must be the presupposition that absurdist and surrealist texts might simply exist for the sake of existence.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

## References

- Abdalqader Abu Jweid, A. N., Termizi, A. A., & Babae, R. (2015). The Concept of Angst in Nikolai Gogol's "*The Nose*". *International Journal of Russian Studies*, No. 4, 65-71.
- Bell, D. F. (2023). On *The Nose*. *SubStance*, 52, 231-236. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sub.2023.a900559>
- Bely, A. (1934). *The Mastery of Gogol*. Ogiz. (In Russian)
- Gogol, N. (2024). *The Enchanted Place* (Vol. 20). Marchen Press.
- Karlinsky, S. (1967). Surrealism in Twentieth-Century Russian Poetry: Churilin, Zabolotskii, Poplavskii. *Slavic Review*, 26, 605-617. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2492612>
- Karlinsky, S. (1992). *The Sexual Labyrinth of Nikolai Gogol*. University of Chicago Press.
- Mirsky, D. S. (1999). *A History of Russian Literature* (p. 155). Northwestern University Press.
- Shklovsky, V. (1970). *String: On the Dissimilarity of the Similar*. Sovetsky Pisatel.
- Shukman, A. (2002). Nikolai Gogol Nos—(Essay Date 1989). In J. Witalec (Ed.), *Short Story Criticism* (Vol. 52). Project Editor, Gale Cengage.