RUSSIAN TEACHERS’ RESOURCES
TEACHING FILM AND LITERATURE
FOR AS AND A2

STUDYING:

КАВКАЗСКИЙ ПЛЕННИК, СЕРГЕЙ БОДРОВ (СТАРШИЙ)
PRISONER OF THE MOUNTAINS,
DIRECTED BY SERGEY BODROV SNR.

УТОМЛЁННЫЕ СОЛНЦЕМ, Н.С. МИХАЛКОВ
BURNT BY THE SUN, DIRECTED BY NIKITA MIKHAIKOV

ЛЕВИАФАН, АНДРЕЙ ЗВЯГИНЦЕВ
LEVIATHAN, DIRECTED BY ANDREY ZVYAGINTSEV

ВИШНЁВЫЙ САД, А.П. ЧЕХОВ
THE CHERRY ORCHARD, BY ANTON CHEKHOV

ПИКОВАЯ ДАМА, А.С. ПУШКИН
THE QUEEN OF SPADES, BY ALEKSANDR PUSHKIN

РЕВИЗОР, Н.В. ГОГОЛЬ
THE GOVERNMENT INSPECTOR, BY NIKOLAI GOGOL
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INTRODUCTION AND RESOURCE RATIONALE

These resources have been developed in response to changes in the content of the AS/A2 curricula for Italian and Russian, which are effective from September 2017. They have been designed to give support and guidance to MFL teachers in selecting and teaching the film and literature content of the curricula.

There are five sections to this resource:

1. Why teach this text?
This section explains the relevance and benefits of teaching this text/film for teachers and their students. It also describes how the text/film fits in to the A-level as a whole, as well as its links with other A-level subjects.

2. Ways to read this text
This section briefly describes the different critical lenses for reading a text/film, as well as outlining different themes. This section will be particularly useful for the A2 exam questions, which are theme-based. Topics from previous exam questions have been integrated into this section.

3. Students
This section suggests how this text/film can appeal to certain students, according to interests, studies and background. For example this film will appeal to students who may be interested in studying social policy.

4. Useful passages/sequences
This section highlights specific sequences/passages from the film/text that are especially rich and point towards the ways in which these can be used for teaching.

   a. Characters
   This sub-section highlights a passage which would be useful in the teaching of characterisation and character relationships in the text/film. This sub-section is particularly useful for the AS exam questions, which focus on character analysis.

   b. Themes
   This sub-section highlights a passage which would be useful in the teaching of a major theme in the context of the whole text/film. This selected sequence/passage is normally an effective inroad for the discussion of the wider concerns/themes of the text/film. This sub-section is particularly useful for the A2 exam question, which is based on wider analysis of themes/contexts.

   c. Language
   This sub-section highlights a linguistically rich and/or interesting passage/sequence in terms of grammar, style, tone, genre, register, dialect, pronunciation etc. This sub-section is not exam-focused but teachers may find it useful for other focuses i.e. themes, characterisation, genre.

   d. Cinematography/form and genre
   The cinematography sub-section focuses on directorial and cinematographic technique in films. It aims to guide teachers who may not be familiar with teaching film. This sub-section is particularly useful for AS and A2 exam questions that deal with colour, sound, directorial technique, etc.

   The form and genre sub-section focuses on the structure, form and genre of literary texts in order to guide the teaching of certain kinds of texts (novels and plays).

5. Further reading
This section provides links to websites, useful sources, articles and online books in English and each target language that can be used as pedagogic resources and/or preparatory material.

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Further support
To find out how the University of Leeds can support your teaching, including teachers’ conferences, CPD, learning festivals and further resources, contact our Arts Engagement Team:

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КАВКАЗСКИЙ ПЛЕННИК
СЕРГЕЙ БОДРОВ (СТАРШИЙ)

PRISONER OF THE MOUNTAINS
SERGEY BODROV SNR
An inexperienced conscript and a seasoned mercenary are captured by the Chechens during the First Chechen War. The village head is planning to exchange them for his son who has been captured by the Russians. Things don’t go according to plan. The mercenary is killed after an escape attempt, as is the son of the village head. The father intends to kill the remaining Russian prisoner, but, in the end, lets him go.

Why teach this text?
The two Chechen wars and their aftermath have done much to shape modern Russia. This film was shot while the First Chechen War was still in progress. It is not a documentary, but it is a curious historical document. It illustrates one popular (and broadly positive) stereotype of the Chechens and touches on many of the common concerns of the day: the issue of prisoner exchanges, the role played by the soldiers’ mothers, poor morale, corruption, brutality, etc.

Ways to read this text
A postcolonial reading is, in this case, ideal.

1. The film plays on the stereotype of the Chechen as a “noble savage”: simple, direct, brave in battle, fiercely loyal to family, country and tradition, and ultimately just in his cruelty. By contrast, the Russian side embodies modern civilisation in a state of moral decay. This is a recurring trope in colonial societies. Tacitus had a similar view of the Germanic tribes whose lands Rome was trying to colonise. In the specific context of Russia and the Caucasus, this narrative gained popularity during the Caucasian wars of the 19th century. The film is based on a children’s story by Tolstoy (1872), which is immensely popular and routinely studied in schools to this day. Tolstoy’s story was itself based on a narrative poem by Pushkin (1822).

2. The film is also a product of Russia’s defeat in the Cold War and subsequent cultural domination by the West. Кавказский пленник follows the conventions of a quintessentially American genre, the Vietnam film. At the same time, this is a film that saw the first appearance of Sergey Bodrov Junior’s pointedly Russian on-screen persona, an easy-going lad who seems a bit dim at first but turns out to be resourceful and possessed of a flawless moral compass.

Students
This film may appeal to students with an interest in post-Soviet history and politics, or a broader interest in post-colonial societies and the interplay between cultures in a state of conflict. As a Russian take on an American genre, it may also be an interesting curio for students of film.

Useful passages
1. Themes
A demoralised and undisciplined army: this is an army still reeling from the breakup of the USSR, an army where a soldier can barter his weapon for a couple of bottles of vodka (the scene in the shop). The weapon is subsequently sold to his enemy. This really happened.

Poor leadership: when, at the beginning of the film, we see a heroic-looking Sanya returning from a mission, it turns out that his mission was actually to procure vodka for the Major. The Major, the highest ranking officer in the film, is also the least likable character. Of course, he is merely a Major; what is being hinted at here is the suspected corruption and ineptitude of the generals and the politicians.

Russian prisoners of war: hostages quickly became a major issue in the First Chechen War. Hundreds of Russian soldiers ended up in captivity. Hostage-taking for exchange or ransom became a popular business among Chechen fighters. Executions and maltreatment of prisoners were relatively common on both sides. Right at the beginning we see Sanya firing at the barn where Chechen prisoners are held.

The role of the mothers. The captured soldiers’ mothers came to play a prominent role in prisoner exchanges. In some cases, the Chechens would only agree to return the captives if the mothers came to collect them in person. Since the mothers’ motivation was beyond doubt, their presence served as a guarantee of safety. The emotional reunion also made for great propaganda footage.
2. Language
The Chechen characters spend the bulk of their time speaking in Chechen, a language very different to Russian. There are no subtitles, so we, like the captured soldiers, have no idea what is being said. When the Chechens speak Russian, they speak with a distinctive Caucasus accent. They speak very much as foreigners, in short, complete sentences.

One interesting detail is that Abdul-Murat addresses the postal clerk as "уважаемая". This quite typically Caucasian. Forms of address like дорогой, любезный и уважаемый are normally only used in formal speeches and written documents, and are always followed by the addressee's name. However, Caucasians sometimes use these words on their own as a form of polite address (similar to sir/madam). Coming from a Russian, this would sound as hostile sarcasm (a bit like pal in English).

The song that Sanya whistles when we first see him, the same song that we subsequently hear as the armoured personnel carrier is heading into the mountains, and then again hummed by Hasan, is Синий платочек. This was a popular song during WWII. It has roughly the same cultural significance in Russia as We'll Meet Again in Britain. The immediate associations are of heroism and fighting for something worthwhile. Its use here is ironic. The fact that this is the song Hasan choses to "sing" also signals that he is very familiar with Russian culture and, despite everything, he bears no ill will towards it.

Дух, the pejorative term for the enemy, is a contraction of душман (Tajik for "enemy"), a word used to refer to hostile Afghan fighters during the war of 1979-89.

3. Characters
This is, essentially, a buddy film. Two men face adversity together. At first they don't get along, then they become friends, then their friendship is tested.

Sanya is the Byronic anti-hero. He rebels against the world. He does not maintain contact with his well-heeled family and has chosen war over a promising acting career. We do periodically see cracks in his coating of cynicism and nihilism. He finds rapport with Ivan and Hasan, breaks down in tears in the scene on the roof, and does his best to keep Ivan out of danger. Part of Sanya's charisma stems from his ambiguity. Is he a monster or just a damaged man? He jokes about wanting to come back to the village, torch the place, kill Hasan and Abdul-Murat, and rape the girl. But how much of a joke is it? Would he actually do it?

Ivan is the first incarnation of Sergey Bodrov Jnr.'s signature character: an ordinary lad who, at first, seems like a bit of a fool but actually turns out to have massive hidden reserves of emotional intelligence and moral intuition. He is calm, resourceful, easy-going, generous and optimistic. These are the stock traits of the "ordinary" protagonist in Russian fairytales, like the kind girl in Баба-яга and the labourer in Несмеяна-царевна. Ivan embodies an idea of virtue that is very deeply embedded in the culture and seen as very Russian. (It was Bodrov Jnr.’s next film, Брат, that truly made him a star.)

4. Cinematography
In the 1990s, Russian cinema came to be heavily influenced by Hollywood. Take, for example, the last scene with the helicopters flying in to destroy the village (probably a reference to the shelling of Pervomayskoye in January 1996). The Vietnam "air cavalry" is one of the iconic images of Hollywood, and thousands of helicopters were, indeed, deployed in Vietnam. By contrast, in the First Chechen War, Russian air cover was often poor, and the iconic images of wholesale destruction were the images of settlements bombarded by artillery (e.g. Pervomayskoye). The director has borrowed a visual cliché from a high-prestige culture and applied it to a situation where, factually, it does not really fit. However, the association with Hollywood would have itself made the film more credible to its target audience because of the widespread enthusiasm for all things Western in the 1990s. You can compare Кавказский пленник to Афганский излом, a very well regarded (and thoroughly anti-war) film about the Soviet-Afghan War, released in 1990 and very much in keeping with the conventions of Soviet war films.

Кавказский пленник is also a product of a literary tradition, going back to high Romanticism. The names of the central characters are mostly taken from Tolstoy's children's story. However, Tolstoy paints the Chechens in a somewhat unsympathetic light (they are definitely the 'baddies') – except for Dina who is portrayed as a lively and good-natured child. The film is closer in spirit to Pushkin's original depiction of a race of noble warriors and a demure virgin who falls for their Russian captive.
Further reading

• A CBS documentary about the First Chechen War. This is a highly politicised and emotive topic. It is extremely hard to find relatively neutral material in either language but this documentary goes some way towards this. Accessed: 19th May 2017 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_PWpdfGzM&t=2s


• Кавказский пленник – Толстой (1872). Tolstoy's children story, part of the Russian school curriculum to this day. The girl helps the prisoner escape but out of pity rather than love. Accessed: 19th May 2017 http://rvb.ru/tolstoy/01text/vol_10/01text/0243.htm

УТОМЛЁННЫЕ СОЛНЦЕМ
Н.С. МИХАЛКОВ

BURNT BY THE SUN
DIRECTED BY NIKITA MIKHALKOV
Sergey Kotov, a Red Army commander and hero of the Civil War, is living the halcyon life of a country gentleman with his wife and daughter. One day, a charismatic guest by the name of Mitya comes to their house. He turns out to be the wife’s childhood sweetheart and her former fiancé. He had fought for the Tsarists and was driven out of the country by Kotov ten years earlier. Now he has returned and joined Stalin’s NKVD. He has come to exact his revenge.

Why teach this text?
This film deals with some of the most significant themes in 20th century Russian history: the Revolution and the Civil War, the White Emigration, and Stalin’s purges. It also shows what many Russians see as the ideal Russian life: the country house, the loving couple and their child, the cultured extended family, the beauty and silliness of the world... It is also a moral tale, a story of vengeance in the vein of The Count of Monte Cristo. Kotov has stolen his perfect life from Mitya and now Mitya has come for his pound of flesh.

Ways to read this text
With its conflicted and somewhat ironic nostalgia, Burnt by the Sun is an interesting film to analyse from a postmodern perspective. Mikhalkov juxtaposes and subverts an array of scripts and stereotypes that would have been extremely familiar to a Russian audience in 1994. He creates a world that is, at the same time, immediately recognisable and somewhat dreamlike. The pensive and introspective world of Chekhov collides with the relentless optimism and collectivism of Soviet Russia. A heroic Red Army commander becomes a country gentleman. The tragic émigré musician turns out to be the ruthless secret policeman.

The intertextual richness of this film means that it works well in tandem with most of the other texts on the syllabus. Like The Cherry Orchard and Leviathan, this is a story of a family uprooted by the forces of history.
Like Leviathan, this is a story of a man and his family broken by a monster-state (though Zviagintsev and Mikhalkov draw some radically different conclusions from the story).
Like The Government Inspector and Leviathan, this is a story of opposition between the various centres of power in society. Mitya is the feared government official travelling incognito.
Like The Queen of Spades, this is a story of a man destroyed by obsession.

Students
This film will clearly appeal to a student with a strong interest in Russian history, especially the turbulent first half of the 20th century. It will also appeal to those with a broader interest in Russian society and culture. Nikita Mikhalkov is one of the main voices of Russia’s cultural mainstream, and his films say a lot about how Russians tend to view themselves. Students of film and drama might enjoy exploring the rich landscape of intertextual references, particularly those to Gone with the Wind and the world of Chekhov’s plays and stories.

1. Themes
One prominent and interesting theme to explore is the theme of continuity vs. discontinuity.
Mikhalkov had set out to show that, even near the peak of the Great Terror, the other Russia, a happier and more human Russia, the Russia of Chekhov and Tolstoy, still existed. It is as if a freak plague of ball lightning has descended on otherwise normal life.

At the same time, there is something artificial and unstable about the island of supposedly unchanged life we see on the screen. It is clear that the sympathies of everyone in the house, apart from Kotov, lie with the Whites, yet the continued existence of their idyllic bubble is entirely dependent on Kotov, a hero of the Reds. He and his little daughter are the only people who truly feel a connection to the new regime.

Mitya arrives not so much as a ball lightning but as an avenging ghost. Kotov had coerced him into leaving the country ten years earlier, abandoning his love and his home, and Mitya has not been in contact with anyone since. He arrives assuming that life as he knew must have been destroyed – he is surprised when Nadya tells him that Marusya’s mother and grandmother, and the feebleminded housemaid are all still alive, and everyone is still living in the big house. Arguably, it is not Mitya that has truly been away from the world but everyone else, living behind the broad shoulders of Kotov. Mitya is their point of contact with reality.
2. Language

This film is full of cultural references – some very obvious, some less so. Consider the title alone: “Утомлённые солнцем” can be viewed as a poetic image evocative of a gentle Chekhovian melancholy. The characters in the film are really Chekhov’s characters: Mikhailov has consciously taken the characters from Незаконченная пьеса для механического пианино and dropped them into Stalin’s world. The last words of Marusya’s father are the real last words of Chekhov’s brother (“…что же я вижу перед смертью? Какие-то поезда с гусями! Обидно, глупо!”).

Солнце is an obvious metaphor for a god-like dictator or the promise of a shining Utopia. “Утомлённые солнцем” can thus be read as “worn out and disappointed by relentless adulation and optimism”.

“Утомлённое солнце” is the name of the tango played at various points during the film. It is a song about parting, an acknowledgement that love is gone – the love between Mitya and Marusya, the love between the new state and Kotov, the love between the Russian people the Soviet ideal (the film was released in 1994). The song was originally written by a Polish composer. In the Russian version, the parting is amicable. In the Polish version, the woman is “stolen” by a man who is “richer and better”. The original Polish name of the song, “Ostatnia niedziela”, translates as “The Last Sunday”. All these things are echoed in the narrative.

“Утомлённые солнцем” echoes “Унесённые ветром”, the Russian translation of “Gone with the Wind”, an iconic saga about a “family nest” and people caught up in the tide of history.

3. Characters

Kotov is a believer in moral choices (“У человека всегда есть два пути, Маруся.”). As far as he is concerned, Mitya is a man who has been weighed and found wanting: he had chosen to leave his love and his country, and to sacrifice his honour for nothing. Another man has stolen the happy life that should have been his, and there is no way to get it back. He has nothing to live for but revenge, which he delivers with supreme ruthlessness.

As an NKVD officer, he knows that there is no way to destroy the colonel without collateral damage. The ball lightning goes after a bird, but an entire tree goes up in flames. Mitya does what the Revolution and the Civil War failed to: he destroys the family nest.

The Truck-driver is a seeker after Utopia. He is looking for a place called Загорянка. (“За горами” is an approximate equivalent of “far, far away”). He had the directions on a piece of paper in his shirt pocket, but the writing came off when his wife washed the shirt. It turns out, he probably had the name wrong all along.

4. Cinematography

At a glance, the film seems to observe the classical unities of time, place and action. It starts with an exposition, where the protagonist (Kotov), his retinue and the location are introduced. This is followed by the arrival of an antagonist (Mitya) and the introduction of a conflict (competition for Marusya’s love). The tension builds to a climax (Mitya’s “fairy tale”) and then unravels towards the resolution (broken and bloodied Kotov crying in Mitya’s car). The colour scheme is very friendly: white, brilliant green, pastel blue and grey, soft brown – the colours of summer. The occasional flashes of crimson on the banners feel festive.

However, this is a play within a play. The film actually starts and finishes in Mitya’s flat in Moscow. The narrative of the family is bracketed by the context of Mitya’s brutal and unhappy life. The first and last scenes are the only points where red bleeds into the background.

The opening scene, where Mitya comes home to his flat in the infamous Дом на набережной (a block of luxury flats for the Party elite, many of whom perished with their entire family), is like the initial menacing chords in Prokofiev’s Romeo & Juliet. We know that something terrible must eventually follow. Like in Ревизор, the conflict is introduced straight away. It is a conflict taking place within Mitya: he agrees to do something he does not want to do. The sudden appearance and dissipation of the ball lightning, like the strange breaking string noise at the ends of Acts II and IV of The Cherry Orchard, marks the release of tension within him. The true resolution is Mitya’s suicide. He slashes his veins with the razor we glimpsed in the opening scene, fulfilling Chekhov’s famous dramatic rule: “Если на сцене есть ружье, оно должно выстрелить”.

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Further reading

• Фильм на уроке - Кудрявцева Е. “Утомлённые солнцем”. Literally everything you need to teach this film: an extensive list of exercises, a glossary, several critical articles, the screenplay (showing amendments made for the actual filming), the lyrics of the songs used in the movie, and a lot of peripheral cultural information. (PDF download) Accessed 19th May 2017. http://www.bilingual-online.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=88%3Automlonyesolncem&catid=30%3Astarshie-klassy&Itemid=15&lang=ru

Information about Sergey Efron, the real-life inspiration behind Mitya, a returnee émigré, a senior NKVD agent, the husband of one of Russia’s best female poets, Marina Tsvetaeva.

• Accessed 19th May 2017. Знала ли Марина Цветаева, что её муж — агент НКВД?

• Эфрон, Сергей Яковлевич
https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%A0%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%BF%E0%99%83%E0%99%83

• Утомленное солнце, the song
https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%9F%D0%B0%D0%B7%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B0

• Неоконченная пьеса для механического пианино, 1977. The film which first won Mikhalkov international acclaim; an adaptation of several Chekhov stories. Accessed 19th May 2017
This film Andrey Zvyagintsev’s withering look at the modern Russian state. Somewhere on the northern fringes of Russia, a visiting lawyer from Moscow attempts to save his old friend from an illegal eviction by a corrupt local politician who wants to demolish the family’s house in order to build a new church. The corrupt politician wins and, to make his point, destroys not only the house but the man and his family too. This film is beautifully shot and, for some, emotionally draining.

Why teach this film?
If Mikhalkov (the director of Утомлённые солнцем) is a voice of the Russian cultural mainstream, Zvyagintsev is a voice of the non-conformists and dissenters. Левиафан was hugely controversial in Russia. It portrays a deeply corrupt and exploitative state that mangles ordinary lives without a second thought, and an equally callous and morally bankrupt institutional church. The Russia of Leviathan is a country where the social contract has completely broken down, a place reverting to a brutally indifferent state of nature.

Ways to read this film
Thomas Hobbes’ Leviathan is a metaphor for a well-functioning state based on a social contract: the body of the nation consents to be governed by one common head. People abide by the rule of law in order to reap the benefits of peace and stability. Hobbesian rhetoric is often used to justify strong top-down government.

Zvyagintsev’s point is that Russia’s Leviathan is catastrophically weak. The country exists in a brutal and anarchic state where the strong are free to tyrannise the weak. It is ruled not by a wise and benevolent government but by “a confederacy of deceivers that, to obtain dominion over men in this present world, endeavour, by dark and erroneous doctrines, to extinguish in them the light, both of nature and of the gospel” (Hobbes).

This is a wonderful film to study alongside Ревизор and Утомлённые солнцем. In Ревизор, there is corruption at local level but also hope that the central government might be wise and just. In Утомлённые солнцем, the central government is unwise and unjust. In Leviathan, the central government is effectively absent. The country is in the hands of robber-barons.

Useful sequences
1. Themes
The benign Leviathan of the Hobbesian state is dead, and the country is ruled not by an organised body of public servants but by a loose gang of robber-barons. The institutions that make a civilised society possible are dead. All that is left of Leviathan is an impressive-looking carcass. Society is reverting to the terrifying state of nature: each man for himself.

Instead of Hobbes’ Leviathan we have the terrifying Leviathan of the Bible, an unfathomably powerful primeval beast that is terrifyingly indifferent to us. (Just before Lilya kills herself, she gets a brief glimpse of a whale out at sea. When Kolya asks the village priest “Where is your God?” the priest replies with a passage from the Book of Job, chapter 41.)

Life is messy. (Dmitriy: “Каждый виноват в чём-то своём.”) Anzhela and Pasha step up to take care of Roman, but it is their testimony that allows the police to frame Kolya. Roman fiercely loves his father but ends up driving the woman he loves to suicide. Dmitriy arrives as a knight in shining armour but leaves a trail of terrible devastation. Lilya decides to stay but does not have the strength to make the marriage work. Kolya genuinely loves Lilya, but the scene in the cellar is basically rape (compare to Kotov and Marusya making up in Утомлённые солнцем).

Alcohol – why so much of it? Partly, it is a social thing. The shooting trip is a birthday party, so there are drinking games. However, there are two characters who we see drinking alone: Kolya and the Mayor. Kolya drinks to numb the pain of loss. The Mayor drinks to fill up the abyss of an empty soul.

Students
Leviathan will appeal to students with a pronounced interest in contemporary Russia and the political and cultural issues that preoccupy its counter-culture, or with a more general interest in the interplay between politics, law and religion in society. Being an extremely well-crafted and stylish piece of cinema, Leviathan has a lot to offer to a student with a strong interest in film and will likely appeal to anyone wishing to travel to provincial “non-touristy” Russia – the landscapes are genuinely epic.
2. Language

Dmitriy is a successful Moscow lawyer. His default register is what one may consider the “prestige dialect” of Russian. He is polite and sparing with exclamations. He is also a fluent user of administrative clichés (“оперативно оповещаю”, “восстановить справедливость”…). His sentences can get quite complex, and he rarely hesitates or changes tack midway through. However, he has some trouble matching Kolya’s more down-to-earth register. During their drinking session, Dmitriy says: “Ну можно как-то взглянуть на ситуацию иначе?” – perhaps a somewhat formal sounding phrase. He then massively immediately overcompensates with “Вот так, блядь, братуха-сука! Прими её, блядь, как вызов, сука! Всё, блядь, по новой!” The extra coarse form of address (“братуха-сука”) and the barrage of swearing actually make the utterance quite hard to follow. Yet the underlying sentence “Прими её [ситуацию] как вызов – всё по новой” still sounds quite literary.

Anzhela is a great character for everyday colloquial language, such as “мент”, “навалимся гурьбой”, “дал в глаз”, and the wonderful word “скоммуниздал”, a portmanteau of “коммунизм” and “спиздил”.

The language of the Bishop echoes the Bible. He often inverts the default word order (verb before subject: “Жертвуешь ты много”; object before verb: “Рыбки отведай”, etc.) and uses some rather archaic expressions (“ведать”, “отведать”) or specifically liturgical ones (“мирский удел”, “царствие небесное”…). The appearance of an administrative cliché like “на своём участке ответственности” feels quite incongruous with the overall air of solemnity.

The Mayor is constantly struggling to find words. His register is usually not what you would expect of a man in public office. He speaks like an inarticulate and uneducated gangster, not a civil servant.

3. Characters

Kolya is, like all people, a bit flawed but, fundamentally, he is a good man. He is, basically, Job from the Old Testament, a righteous man who has everything taken away from him and is left asking “Why me, Lord?”

Dmitriy and Kolya have been best friends since their army days. Their friendship endures despite them having ended up on different sides of a class divide: Kolya is a provincial mechanic, and Mitya is a big city lawyer.

A lot is uncertain about Dmitriy. Does he only come to feel truly remorseful about his affair with Lilya after they get caught? Are his risky gambles motivated by a desire to show off before Lilya or even to bring her and Kolya to Moscow, so that he has easy access to her? Or is he trying to convince himself that he is a good friend? Are the guilt and the shame pushing him towards self-destruction? Does he naively trust the system, failing to appreciate the sheer remoteness of the place? It is likely that, to some extent, all of the above are true.

Lilya is the Eve of the story: she reaches for the forbidden fruit (Dmitriy) and pays a terrible price. There is easily recognisable symbolism in Lilya peeling and sucking a pickled tomato. Why does she do it? One factor is that the loss of the house is destroying her and Kolya’s marriage. Not only are they about to lose a comfortable life, but the loss is also turning Kolya into a pessimistic and short-tempered man, who is difficult to live with.

4. Form and Genre

Despite having a strong central narrative with a conventional dramatic structure, and being relatively fast-paced, Leviathan clearly bears the hallmarks of an art film. It has a very distinctive visual style. It is quite economical with expository dialogue (show rather than tell). There is a complex interplay of ideas, symbols and cultural references. The focus is on the characters rather than the action. The target audience is comparatively narrow.

Leviathan has a political point to make, yet what distinguishes it from a propaganda film is its psychological complexity. The characters are, like real people, prone to internal conflicts and doubts. Much remains ambiguous and open to our interpretation. We are encouraged to engage with the difficulties of the human condition. More questions are asked than answered.

The film is shot in widescreen (2.35:1). “Human interest” stories typically use narrower frame sizes for a more personal feel (e.g. the 1.66:1 frame in Утомлённые солнцем). By using a format typically reserved for epics, Zviagintsev gives the narrative extra gravitas. He is telling us that we are watching a great tragedy that should be taken as seriously as King Lear or Hamlet. The amount of background inside the frame also makes the characters look small and lost – they are ordinary people at the mercy of fate. Finally, widescreen makes the scenery look truly spectacular. This is nature as the leviathan of the Bible: an immense primeval beast, a footprint of God that dwarfs all human affairs.
Further reading


• Встреча с Андреем Звягинцевым… A Q&A session with the director after a screening. Accessed on 19th May 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=abhmM0mhHF5
The grandson of a serf and the son of a provincial shopkeeper, Anton Chekhov would become a country doctor and a literary superstar. He died of consumption, aged 44. The Cherry Orchard was his swan song. It is, as per his signature style, simultaneously comic and poignant. An impoverished aristocratic family gathers as their home is about to go under the hammer. It is a play about the changing times, the divisions of class, and human isolation in general.

Why teach this text?

The Cherry Orchard explores themes that are very familiar to us today: social change, awkwardness, isolation and failure to live in the moment. From a historical perspective, this is an interesting text to compare with Pushkin’s Queen of Spades. Chekhov’s aristocracy are the only people that matter. Chekhov’s aristocracy are besieged and bedraggled. Being about class and identity, The Cherry Orchard is a great text for analysing the subtleties of register in Russian. As a theatrical comedy, this is an interesting text to compare with the Government Inspector. The Government Inspector has caricature-ish characters and a climactic ending. The Cherry Orchard has neither.

Ways to read this text?

There are a number of historical and philosophical motifs one could focus on.

Social change and identity: the landed gentry are losing their pre-eminent position in society. An entire social order is crumbling. Uprooted, disoriented people are struggling to make sense of who they are.

Cartesian isolation: the characters’ intense relationship with the place can be viewed as a substitute for connecting with each other. Practically everybody on stage is failing to communicate. Gaev’s grandiloquence, Trofimov’s harangues and Epikhodov’s officialese, all fail to connect. The world is plagued by misunderstandings. Lopakhin craves approval but is seen as a predator.

Paralysis: all the major characters are in some sense, ‘stuck’ (the Hamlet problem). Lyubov’ Andreevna and her brother cannot bring themselves to destroy the orchard, Gaev cannot work up the courage to propose to the woman he loves, Trofimov exhorts everyone to work but is himself an eternal student.

Failure to live in the present: important things are recollected and anticipated but never truly experienced. Even Lopakhin’s purchase of the estate leaves everybody waiting for something else. There are no cathartic resolutions, no moments of enlightenment. Life remains confusing and provisional.

Students

The Cherry Orchard will appeal to students with a strong interest in literature, theatre, and, perhaps, philosophy. Chekhov was a key figure in the development of realist drama and modernist literature. The play’s rich linguistic content will also appeal to the language enthusiast. For someone interested in Russian history, the play is also a snapshot of class dynamics at a critical point in time. The Cherry Orchard was written months before the Russo-Japanese War which would mark the beginning of a decade of economic stagnation in the lead-up to WWI and the Revolution.

Useful passages

1. Themes

Lopakhin’s proposal to the family (Act I, from “Вам уже известно, вишневый сад продаётся” to Varya and Yasha’s entrance)

The social changes that Russia has gone through are made apparent. An aristocratic family is on the brink of bankruptcy. The new middle class is encroaching on their territory – in this case, physically. Lopakhin proposes that the orchard, formerly a status symbol, a pleasure garden, and a source of income, is cleared to make way for holiday allotments for the city folk. Lopakhin sees it as progress. The family see it as catastrophe.

Lopakhin’s non-proposal to Varya (Act III, from “Вторая моя печаль – Варя” to “Да, пора мамочка”)

Two people are in love but unable to communicate. The core of the scene (from “Страшно, никак не найду” onwards) is an excellent example of the phatic function of language. Nobody is really saying anything. The two parties are simply signalling that a communication channel is open, but it never goes any further. Lopakhin is paralysed by his sense of inadequacy. Varya is paralysed by her sense of propriety (Act III, “Мамочка, я могу же я сама делать ему предложение.”).
2. Language

Varya and Anya meet (Act I, from “Дуняша, кофе поскорей” to Yasha’s entrance)

Anya was born an aristocrat. She speaks the way a person who has been exposed to a lot of written texts might speak – mostly in well formed narrative sentences. She also speaks in the clipped style of a busy grownup. The sentences are short and mostly in present tense (indicating that her concerns are current).

Varya, is an adoptee, presumably of peasant stock and that is the linguistic identity she maintains. Many clauses are elliptical or fragmentary (“У него дела много, ему не до меня... и внимания не обращает.”). There are some deviations from standard grammar (“дела много” as opposed to “дел много”). Some words and expressions sound rural and archaic (“покойный”, “хожу ... по хозяйству”). So do the frequent diminutives (мамочка, душечка...). If Anya mostly describes her emotions as part of a factual narrative, Varya emotes in real time: there are exclamations, terms of endearment and imperatives addressed directly to the interlocutor.

Trofimov’s “Человечество идет вперед” speech (Act II)

This is Trofimov in full rhetorical flow. He delivers a long stretch of what could easily be written text. There is a good deal of syntactic complexity and abstraction. The opening sentence is rather nebulous in meaning and ends with an adverbial participle phrase (“совершенствуя свои силы”). This speech is more a standalone oration than part of a conversation. Lopakhin’s response feels like a non sequitur, because Trofimov has left little room for an ordinary conversational response. An appropriate reaction would be to applaud, cheer, reflect, march into battle...

3. Characters

Lopakhin’s “Я купил!” speech (Act III).

This is another point where the social changes happening in Russia are made explicit. One may also speculate that this is where we hear the voice of Chekhov himself. Like Chekhov, Lopakhin is a man whose father and grandfather had been born into serfdom, and, like Chekhov, he has now acquired the ultimate mark of respectability – an estate. Yet his triumph fails to earn him the acceptance he so desperately craves. To the aristocracy, he is still a grabbing nouveau riche upstart.

Lopakhin offers a loan to Trofimov (Act IV, “Я весной посеял маку тысячу десятин” and the next line)

Lopakhin tries to paint himself as a common man. Trofimov rejects this proposition out of hand. (“Твой отец был мужик, мой – аптекарь, и из этого не следует решительно ничего.”) Lopakhin’s ‘common man’ act is unconvincing. He is left in a social limbo. He is simultaneously disconnected from his peasant roots and rejected by the aristocracy he unconsciously emulates.

The conversation between Gaev, Lopakhin, and Firs (Act II, from “Извольте, сударь, надеть, а то сыро” to Trofimov’s, Anya’s and Varya’s entrance)

Firs, the elderly servant, pines for the certainties of a time before the abolition of serfdom, when he was a respected and senior member of what must have been a large team of domestic servants. Like the hundred-year-old bookcase in Act I, Firs is a surviving fragment of a grander past.

Firs abandoned (last scene in the play)

Firs, the bastion of tradition, the symbol of the aristocrats’ status and their obligations towards the lower orders, has been forgotten about. He is facing a lonely death at the end of an unsatisfying life lived vicariously through his masters.
4. Form and genre

*Trofimov and Lopakhin’s goodbye* (Act IV, from “Мне кажется, ехать уже пора” to “Дойду.”)

At the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, a theatrical revolution was taking place in Russia. There was a move away from Victorian melodrama and towards realism. This was spearheaded by the Moscow Art Theatre (MXAT) under the artistic directorship of Konstantin Stanislavski. Chekhov was extremely enthusiastic about this development and wrote several plays for MXAT. The Cherry Orchard was one of them. Chekhov insisted that the play was a comedy. Stanislavsky staged the first production as a tragedy.

In this scene, Chekhov takes full advantage of the new psychologically-nuanced manner of performance. On the face of it, not much happens but, if one follows the undercurrents, this is the point where Lopakhin comes closest to making that human connection he so wants.

Lopakhin and Trofimov are ideological adversaries: a cynical merchant vs. an idealistic intellectual. Lopakhin makes a remark about how he must go back to work and hints that, without the distraction of work, he is getting depressed. Trofimov interprets this as a dig at his own lack of industriousness and responds with hostile sarcasm. The two men exchange a few sly digs, culminating in Trofimov’s backhanded compliment acknowledging that, despite being uncouth, Lopakhin is, at heart, a decent and sensitive man. Lopakhin melts and hugs Trofimov. Then he commits the cardinal faux pas of offering his ever broke interlocutor some money. Trofimov again feels belittled and launches into one of his Nietzsche-esque orations about how he is a free and proud man marching towards a higher truth. The scene finishes with a two-word exchange: “Дойдёшь?” – “Дойду”. Both the question and the answer are somewhat ambiguous. Lopakhin is poking fun at Trofimov’s grand rhetoric, but the joke seems not unfriendly. Trofimov’s response is hard to gauge. Maybe he accepts Lopakhin’s offer of good will, maybe he does not – it depends on the actor’s interpretation, and ours.

**Further reading**

THE QUEEN OF SPADES
BY ALEKSANDR PUSHKIN
The Queen of Spades is a gothic novella, widely considered to be Pushkin’s prose masterpiece. A man who never gambles hears about an old woman who knows a failproof way to win a fortune at the card table. He becomes obsessed with finding out her secret at any cost and ends up unintentionally killing her. Then he loses his fortune and his mind.

Why teach this text?
It is fun. The Queen of Spades is an entertaining story and can be a nice counterbalance to more emotionally draining material like The Cherry Orchard and Leviathan.

That said, this is a story with much depth and artistic merit. Despite its ironic tone, it deals with some big themes such as love, obsession, evil, insanity and destiny. This is a text that inspired two of Dostoyevsky’s great novels (The Gambler and Crime and Punishment).

Finally, Pushkin is to the Russians what Shakespeare is to the English: he is cultural bedrock. This is one of his iconic texts.

Ways to read this text?
We can approach The Queen of Spades as a fairly representative product of the Romantic period. It is an attack on what the Romantics saw as the Enlightenment Cult of Reason. Hermann, the main character is prudent. However, his prudence pales into sociopathy and ultimately drives him into imprudence and insanity.

It is also a parable about fate (a popular theme with the Russian Romantics – see Lermontov’s Fatalist), an exploration of the limits of sanity and reality, a veiled personal confession (Pushkin himself was a compulsive gambler and a prolific philanderer), and an ironic take on the gothic genre.

Another obvious reading is the psychoanalytic one. The Queen of Spades was published 65 years before Freud’s Interpretation of Dreams, but the idea that there exist things within us that are beyond the reach of our conscious mind was already about. The Countess’ ghost is, at least in part, the voice of Hermann’s repressed conscience, his guilty desire to gamble, and the punishing fate that he subconsciously feels he has deserved.

Useful passages
1. Themes
Hermann’s fate sealed (Part II, last paragraph)

Obsession and fate: until now Hermann has avoided gambling, but now the idea of instantaneous risk-free riches is driving him to distraction. It is as if he is being sucked into a maelstrom. Past a certain point, we know that he is not going to escape. He notices Elizaveta and decides to exploit her in order to gain entry into the Countess’ house. Maybe this is chance, maybe fate, maybe the work of an unconscious drive… But this is what both launches the chain of events that destroys him and marks him as a bad man who deserves to be destroyed. From this point on, there is a feeling of inevitability about his downfall. We want him to have some sort of an epiphany and change his ways but realise that this is unlikely.

The ghost comes (Part V, from “Целый день Германн был чрезвычайно расстроен.” onwards)

Sanity and reality: although we cannot be 100% sure, Pushkin hints that this is a fevered dream. Yet Hermann never questions the reliability of the information he receives – maybe because he desperately wants it to be true, maybe because he is an earnest man of reason who always believes the evidence of his senses.

The unconscious and the mystical: we may interpret the Ghost in purely Freudian terms – solely as a manifestation of Hermann’s own guilt and desire. But then how does the ghost know the right cards? Is there something in Hermann’s mind that transcends his individual self? Can we really receive messages from some other plane of existence? Is everything, on some level, connected? Was Coleridge right that “it may be more possible that heaven and earth should pass away, than that a single act, a single thought, should be loosened or lost from that living chain of causes”?

Students
This text will appeal to the students with a strong interest in the Russian literary and philosophical tradition, a broader interest in psychology and psychiatry, or an interest in the gothic genre and its roots in the 18th and 19th century Europe. Students of drama and film may be interested by the many stage and screen adaptations, including Pavel Lungin’s recent film Дама Пик (2016), based on Tchaikovsky’s famous opera (similar in concept and style to Darren Aronofsky’s Black Swan).
2. Language

The Countess’ tale (Part I, from “Надобно знать, что бабушка моя…” onwards)

This passage is a fine example of why Pushkin is so singularly revered by Russians. He was the first person to produce a large body of work in the everyday vernacular that would, subsequently, become the foundation of modern Russian. Here, a card player is telling an anecdote to a group of friends. Though, predictably, a little antiquated, the language is chatty and accessible.

As one would expect of spoken language, the style is broadly paratactic: the sentences are mostly quite short and simple in structure. There is practically never a subordinate clause inside another subordinate clause or a participle phrase inside another participle phrase.

The passage is peppered with colloquial contractions (“Покойный дедушка … был род [с роду] бабушкина [Бабушкиного] дворецкого.”), exclamations and curses (“Куда!”, “Как!”, “Сказка!”, “Да, черта с два!”), the card players’ slang (метать, понтировать, ставить, фараон, соник...), and inclusions of French (“la Vénus muscovite”, “au jeu de la Reine”).

Bear in mind that, prior to Napoleon’s invasion of Russia in 1812, many Russian aristocrats were raised to speak French and regarded Russian as a rather barbarous tongue unfit for polite society. Russian became the fashionable society language after 1812, but the everyday vernacular of the aristocracy retained a lot of French words and constructions.

3. Characters

The conversation between Hermann and Elizaveta (Part IV, from “Вдруг дверь отворилась...” to “Они замолчали.”)

Hermann is a caricature man of reason, a soulless materialist. The way he tells Elizaveta about his deception and the Countess’s death is remarkably direct, and almost matter-of-fact. As far as he is concerned, he meant no harm. He was not really out to seduce Elizaveta or kill the Countess. And, since he discounts emotions, he does not view the distress of being heartbroken or frightened out of one’s wits as significant harm.

Hermann’s appeal to the Countess (end of Part III, from “Графиня сидела вся желтая...” onwards):

The Countess is, in effect, a zombie. She has no real interest in life. The only things that seem to arouse emotion in her are distant memories and imminent threats. From Hermann’s perspective, however, she is the personification of fortune. She is Lady Luck herself – cold, mysterious, capricious, and infinitely powerful. He begs her to grant him his wish and is prepared to offer anything in return, including his immortal soul.

Elizaveta falls in love (Part III, from the beginning to “её записки час от часу становились длиннее и нежнее.”)

Of the three main characters, Elizaveta is the only one who is properly human. Hermann succeeds in breaking down her resistance, thanks to her isolation and her normal human desire to love and be loved. The last paragraph in the passage leaves open the possibility that he actually falls for her too, but his love is eclipsed by his obsession with the Countess’ secret.

…and is corrupted (Conclusion, paragraph two)

Pushkin hints that Hermann’s deception may have left Elizaveta like the late Countess – an emotionally hollow domestic tyrant.

4. Form and genre

The Queen of Spades is either a short novella or a long short story. The two forms are quite similar: there is a small cast of central characters, a single plotline, a single thematic thread, a single viewpoint, and a twist ending. The main difference is size (at around 7000 words, The Queen of Spades is ‘on the cusp’) and the frequent subdivision of the novella into relatively self-contained parts, which is what we see in The Queen of Spades.

The story follows a classic Shakespearean structure. Part I is an exposition: the scene is set, and the theme is introduced. A conflict is set out in Part II: Hermann (the protagonist) wants the Countess (the antagonist) to tell him a secret. There is a period of rising action as Hermann’s intrigue gains momentum, culminating in a climax at the end of Parts III, when Hermann kills the Countess. Then follows the period of falling action, with a false defeat in Part VI, when Hermann loses the secret; a false victory in Part V when the ghost gives him the secret, and a final moment of suspense in Part VI when Hermann stakes his fortune on the cards; and a dénouement, when Hermann loses his fortune and his mind. The author fully returns his world to a new stable state in the conclusion.

In terms of overall genre, The Queen of Spades belongs to gothic fiction. However, it is not the ‘high’ gothic of The Ancient Mariner and Frankenstein but an ironic take on the genre – similar to Washington Irving’s Rip Van Winkle or Gogol’s Ночь перед Рождеством.
Further reading

РЕВИЗОР
Н.В. ГОГОЛЬ

THE GOVERNMENT INSPECTOR
BY NIKOLAI GOGOL
Gogol's classic satire about hierarchy and corruption. A washed-up dandy finds himself in a godforsaken provincial town. The local dignitaries mistake him for somebody important and go out of their way to curry favour with him.

Why teach this text?
It is very funny and excellent introduction to Russia's infamous “vertical of power” («вертикаль власти»). This is a fun and accessible text that deals with the various hierarchical relationships within the Russian society. Many, if not all, of the issues Gogol deals with remain central to modern Russia's political landscape. It is an obvious text to teach alongside Leviathan (a much darker modern-day exploration of tyranny and corruption in a provincial town). Also, few things illustrate different linguistic registers as well as a farce populated by exaggerated characters.

Ways to read this text?
The Government Inspector is a social satire. This is a play about catastrophic malfunction in the system of governance. We have a state which is, at the local level at least, corrupt, inefficient and despotic. This is a very stratified hierarchy with comparatively little routine communication between its different layers. Those below you are worms; those above you are gods. The local-level tyrants are terrified by the thought of contact with higher levels of government. The obvious question to ask is: why is this managerial nightmare happening? Are the people at the top not sufficiently diligent in supervising the various layers of middle management below them? Or is the system intrinsically broken? Is it too big and too hierarchical for effective control to be possible? This is the crux of the big state vs. small state debate – one of the great debates of our time.

On a human level, this text is a fable about how power corrupts. No-one on stage is a cackling villain. There are only fairly ordinary flawed people whose flaws have been allowed to propagate unhindered.

Students
Needless to say, this is an iconic text that will appeal to students with a strong interest in Russian history and culture. It has a lot to offer to those with a broader interest in politics, management, journalism, the social sciences, or political activism.

As a play that combines mid-19th century realism with vestiges of the Baroque and even Renaissance theatre and literature, it will probably be of interest to drama students. There are many recorded performances online, and the play is often staged in English.

Last but not least, this play will appeal to anyone with a specific interest in comedy and the mechanics of humour.

Useful passages
1. Themes
The “vertical of power”: the Mayor reflects on Khlestakov's stories (Act III, Scene IV; from “С министрами играет” to “тебя хотят повесить”).

The Mayor is himself a man who wields almost absolute power within the town. Yet the thought of Khlestakov's life somewhere up in the higher echelons of St. Petersburg officialdom and the fear of being punished by such a mighty force literally gives the Mayor vertigo.

Corruption: the Mayor's prayer (Act I, Scene V; from “О, ох, хо, хо, хо!” to “три пуда воску”).

The Mayor sees God as yet another corrupt official. Rather than promising to repent and mend his ways, the Mayor promises God a massive candle – acquired in the usual way, by extortion.

Laughter as the “hero”: the Mayor’s last speech (Scene V, Act VIII; from “Вот смотрите, смотрите, весь мир” to “в шапку туды ему!”).

Gogol was castigated by the critics for not having included a single positive role model in the play. Gogol's answer was that the “hero” of the play is laughter. It is our laughter that constantly punctures the self-assuredness and hypocrisy of the villains. In this way, it is the audience that goes on a quest to slay the dragon.
2. Language

How to address Khlestakov? (Act III, Scene VI; “Ва-ва-ва... шество, превосходительство...”)

This is a real problem for the Mayor. Forms of address were very important in imperial Russia. They reflected a strict hierarchy of ranks in both military and civil service. The Mayor is clearly at a loss. He even tries dropping the root from the word altogether, which just sounds silly. Eventually he risks a Ваше превосходительство. This is a laughable over-kill. This term of address was reserved for generals and their civil service equivalents. Khlestakov’s real rank is unknown to us, but it is almost certainly something very junior. In his drunken ramblings, Khlestakov claims to have turned down a promotion to коллежский ассессор (the rank of the Judge in the play, the equivalent of an army Major). This in itself is almost certainly a lie - this rank normally took no less than 12 years of service to reach, and Khlestakov does not come across as the kind of employee that gets fast-tracked.

The Mayor gives Khlestakov the tour of the town (Act III, Scene V; the long sentence starting with “В других городах, осмелюсь доложить…”)

This is a caricature of 19th century Russian officialese. There are a lot of big, nebulous positive-sounding words (градоправители, помышление, благочестие, бдительность) and clichéd phrases (осмелюсь доложить, заботятся о своей пользе, нет другого помышления, заслужить внимание начальства). The Mayor is also constantly distancing himself from what he is saying. There are lots of hedging expressions (осмелюсь доложить вам..., то есть..., можно сказать...). When it comes to talking about himself and his colleagues, he uses a circuitous passive construction (нет другого помышления кроме того, чтобы...) that completely avoids any mention of an active agent.

3. Characters

Gogol gives a relatively detailed description of all the main characters in the notes at the beginning of the play; however, we may make some additional observations.

The Mayor’s real face (Scene V, Act VIII; from “Как я? нет, как я, старый дурак!” to “Ну, кто первый выпустил, что он ревизор? Отвечайте.”)

This is the point where the Mayor drops his mask. He is proud of having out-schemed so many people over his 30 years in office and devastated at having now been outplayed by a rank amateur and chancer. What he fears now is the prospect of becoming a laughing stock, of people ceasing to show proper respect for his rank. He fears the ridicule of those scribbling liberals in St. Petersburg.

Khlestakov’s daydream (Act II, Scene V)

Like the town officials, Khlestakov is mostly concerned with the appearance of success rather than actual success.

Khlestakov’s “seduction” (Act IV, Scenes XII-XV)

Khlestakov is a person without a single original thought in his head (as Gogol describes him, пустейший). The “seduction” scenes are a string of regurgitated clichés.

Conversation between Mishka and Osip (Act III, Scene IV)

Osip is the one person on stage who immediately understands what has happened. He is the cunning and somewhat irreverent servant inherited from the Renaissance and Baroque tradition (compare to Leporello, Figaro, Sancho Panza, or Arlecchino). He is surly, because he is stuck with a particularly useless master, so his own fortunes are looking quite unpromising.

4. Form and genre

At first glance, The Government Inspector looks like a fairly conventional five-act play with a lot of traces of Baroque drama. The comedy of mistaken identity had long been a popular format in European theatre (take A Midsummer Night’s Dream or Twelfth Night). Throughout the play, there is a steady accumulation of lies and misunderstandings, all of which get resolved in the denouement at the end. There is even a final tableau where Gogol, like a Baroque artist, attempts to capture an instant of physical tumult. This is to be expected: Gogol was heavily influenced by the Ukrainian Baroque tradition (as well as the literary fashions of early 19th century St Petersburg). But his take on a well-established genre is quite original.

1) There is no dedicated exposition. Gogol drops us straight into the action. The very first line ends with “к нам едет ревизор”. This is the incentive moment, the point where the central conflict of the play is introduced, and it happens as soon as the curtains go up. We meet the characters and learn about the setting as tension is already building.

2) There is no hero. No-one on stage really deserves our sympathy. Khlestakov is not a jester who has “stuck it” to the self-important officials. He is genuinely a fool who simply got lucky. We know that his luck probably will not last – he will fritter away his loot before the year is out.

3) There is no romantic sub-plot. Khlestakov’s “seductions” are fundamentally empty of actual feeling, and, in the end, it all comes to nothing.
Further reading

- Театральный разъезд – Н.В. Гоголь. A play written by Gogol as a “commentary” to Ревизор; discusses laughter as the “hero” (see the author’s long speech at the end) (Accessed 22nd May 2017) http://az.lib.ru/g/gogolx_n_w/text_0082.shtml