

The Diary of a Madman



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF NIKOLAI GOGOL

Nikolai Gogol lived in the Ukrainian village of Sorochintsy with his parents, who belonged to the “petty gentry,” a class of society distinguished by self-management of its lands and farms. In 1828, Gogol traveled to St. Petersburg to acquire a civil service job and work on achieving literary fame. Unable, at first, to form the connections necessary to secure a job, he traveled to Germany and returned to St. Petersburg only when his money ran out. He then took up a low-paying bureaucratic job and published sporadically for periodicals until achieving his literary breakthrough with *Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka*. He continued to write throughout the 1830s, releasing *Mirgorod* and two volumes of prose titled *Arabesques*. His play, *The Government Inspector*, was performed as a result of a direct order from the tsar, Nicholas I. Gogol traveled through Germany and Switzerland before settling in Rome, where he finished the first volume of his book *Dead Souls*. *Dead Souls* was published in 1842, the same year that his first collection of his works featuring the famous short story “The Overcoat” was released. Gogol attempted to finish the next volume of *Dead Souls* for the next few years, but his creative output declined. He returned to Russia in 1848 and eventually turned to the aid of a priest, Matvey Konstantinovsky, who prescribed intense ascetic practices and fasting; this caused Gogol’s spirits to deteriorate further. He eventually burned the drafts of the second volume of *Dead Souls*, began refusing food, and died shortly thereafter.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

“Diary of a Madman” was written in 1835, during the reign of the autocratic tsar Nicholas I. Corrupt bureaucracy and militarism marked this time period in Russian history, with Nicholas I relying on military men to circumvent the normal administration of a kingdom. This atmosphere of bureaucratic secrecy and inefficiency is the backdrop for Gogol’s story, which depicts the life of Poprishchin, a low-level councillor in St. Petersburg. Gogol’s story also references other European aristocrats; it makes allusions to the death of King Ferdinand VII in 1833 as well as the politician Jules-Armand, minister of foreign affairs under King Charles X of France.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Like “Diary of a Madman,” many of Gogol’s other works, such as “The Overcoat” and the play *The Government Inspector*, feature protagonists who are low-level civil servants or bureaucrats. In

addition, “Diary of a Madman” contains elements of gothic horror and surrealism; these elements have much in common with those found in the works of Edgar Allan Poe. Gogol’s use of satire has also led some theorists to link his work with the stories of Laurence Sterne. Dostoyevsky’s *Notes from the Underground* features a first-person point of view, much like “Diary of a Madman.” Dostoyevsky is said to have cited Gogol as the major influence for the Russian realist writers of the 19th-century.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Diary of a Madman
- **When Written:** 1835
- **Where Written:** St. Petersburg
- **When Published:** 1835
- **Literary Period:** 19th-century Russian realism
- **Genre:** Short story
- **Setting:** The story takes place in a section of the city of St. Petersburg. After Poprishchin descends into insanity, he believes he is living in Spain; he is actually in an unnamed insane asylum.
- **Climax:** Poprishchin begins to believe he is Spain’s long-lost king and is taken away to an insane asylum.
- **Antagonist:** Aksenty Ivanovich Poprishchin, the lord chancellor (a worker at the insane asylum)
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

The Northern Bee. Poprishchin mentions reading the *Bee*, short for the Northern Bee, a newspaper circulated in St. Petersburg. The newspaper, often read by those in the middle class, covered domestic and foreign affairs and sometimes printed stories about literature and philosophy. The *Bee* also featured stories about insane asylums, which may have provided inspiration for “Diary of a Madman.”

The Inquisition. When Poprishchin is in the asylum, he believes his capture and torture is a result of the Spanish Inquisition. The Inquisition was a judicial institution established in Spain to persecute heretics who held opinions contrary to orthodox Christian beliefs. The inquisitors who carried out the mission of the Inquisition were known for their brutal tactics.



PLOT SUMMARY

Aksenty Ivanovich Poprishchin is a middle-aged, low-level clerk

who is fixated on social rank and status. He pores over the details of his life in diary entries, which often illustrate his frustration and anger. One day, he arrives late at his office, and decides to go for a walk through town. While walking, he runs into Sophie, the daughter of his boss, the director. Sophie is out doing errands at a local shop; her lapdog, Medji, waits for her owner outside.

Poprishchin suddenly hears a “voice” and realizes that Medji, the lapdog, is talking to Fidèle, another neighborhood dog. Poprishchin is at first “very surprised” to hear the dogs speak in “human language,” but then claims that there have been “many examples” of this type of animal behavior “in the world.” Poprishchin eavesdrops further on the dogs’ conversation, and hears that Medji has written Fidèle a letter. He ends that day’s diary entry by making a “note” of where Fidèle lives, and claims he will visit soon.

In the next day’s diary entry, Poprishchin recalls scenes from his office. He recounts how his boss’s study is filled with books with foreign titles, indicating that the director is an educated man. When Sophie walks into the office, Poprishchin is struck dumb by her appearance. In his head, he fantasizes about impressing her with well-worded phrases. In reality, however, Sophie drops her handkerchief and Poprishchin nearly trips over his feet to retrieve it for her; she then leaves, with the two of them having exchanged barely any words. A lackey comes in and tells Poprishchin to go home for the day.

The next few entries in Poprishchin’s diary describe mundane scenes from his life. He has an interaction with the section chief, one of his managers, about his unimpressive career trajectory. Instead of taking the criticism seriously, Poprishchin believes the section chief is envious of him for his innate social status.

Poprishchin’s diary eventually returns to the subject of the dogs’ letters. He admits to seeing Medji in town, and writes about how he asked her to reveal details about Sophie’s life. He then describes going to Fidèle’s home and stealing a “bundle” of “little papers.” Poprishchin believes the letters will help him “finally learn” about the “affairs” of his neighborhood, as dogs know “all the political relations.” Poprishchin does not seem shocked at his own behavior, and is fully convinced that the dogs are capable of writing each other letters about political intrigue.

Poprishchin reads the letters, which sometimes contain digressions about food and being petted by the dogs’ owners but also reveal the director’s political ambitions, as well as Sophie’s love interest, a low-ranking nobleman named Teplov. Poprishchin is infuriated by this news, and writes angrily in his diary about how richer men get “all that’s best in the world.”

Poprishchin continues to express anger and frustration in his diary entries, railing against what he believes to be an unjust world. He writes, somewhat hopefully, that he might be “some

sort of count or general,” and that maybe his role as “councillor” is a mistake. He begins to think he may not know who he really is.

He then recounts reading a story in the newspaper, where there are “strange doings” in Spain. He reads that the “throne is vacant” and that Spain’s officials are trying to select “an heir.” Poprishchin expresses disbelief, claiming that a state cannot “be without a king.” He starts to believe that the king is merely somewhere “unknown,” or hiding due to mysterious circumstances.

Suddenly, Poprishchin’s diary entries change tone. He writes that it is the “Year 2000” and that Spain’s king “has been found.” He claims that he, in fact, is Spain’s long-lost king, and cannot fathom how he ever thought he was a mere “councillor.” Poprishchin’s diary entries continue to become more nonsensical. He writes in an entry dated the “86th of Martober” that he has not been to work for “three weeks.” When he finally shows up to the office, having been scolded by his manager, he signs papers as “**Ferdinand VIII**,” the name he has given himself as Spain’s lost king. He then begins a long, written litany against women, claiming that they are all “in love with the devil.”

Poprishchin eventually writes that “Spanish deputies” have taken him to Spain, but his descriptions make it clear that he is actually being imprisoned in an asylum. At this point, Poprishchin’s entries are devoid of any semblance of reality; he believes that “China and Spain” are “one and the same,” and is worried about a phenomenon where “the earth” sits on “the moon.” When he announces his worries to the other patients at the asylum, a staff member beats him with a stick.

Poprishchin’s fantasy persists, and he believes the various corporal punishments he receives are forms of “court etiquette” in Spain. This fantasy initially keeps him from realizing the bleakness of his situation, though he admits the “cursed stick” is “extremely painful.”

Eventually, however, this physical torture begins to take away the shine of Poprishchin’s royal delusion and he becomes aware of his total isolation. He claims his “head is burning,” and asks to be saved and carried “out of” the “world.” He imagines a scene with his mother in which he cries out for her to save him, her “sick child.” With this cry for help, Poprishchin briefly acknowledges his alienation from the world. He then adds, nonsensically, that the “Dey of Algiers,” a royal figure, has a “bump” under “his nose,” indicating that his insanity has returned.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Aksenty Ivanovich Poprishchin – Poprishchin, the protagonist of “Diary of a Madman,” is a low-level civil servant with an

uninspiring career who is obsessed with social class and status. He is resentful and envious of his superiors, and dismissive of strangers he considers low-class, but never expresses his acidic thoughts aloud. Instead, he expresses his true feelings in the form of angry, judgmental diary entries. Poprishchin is also in love with Sophie, the daughter of his boss, but his poetic thoughts and feelings for her never translate into actual conversations. Poprishchin's inability to truly communicate with anyone, combined with his fixation on social status, puts him in a state of total isolation. Eventually, he loses his sanity. Throughout the story, Poprishchin is unable to distinguish between fantasy and reality: he believes that two dogs are talking in human language, for instance, and that he is a long-lost king of Spain. Poprishchin is eventually taken to an insane asylum, where he spends his days in a paranoid state or absorbed by delusions of grandeur. Poprishchin eventually, briefly, realizes how isolated he has become and ends the story with an awareness that he is all alone in the world, with no true connection to tether him to other people.

Sophie – Sophie, an upper-class woman, is the daughter of Poprishchin's boss and is Poprishchin's love interest. Poprishchin is infatuated with Sophie, and often writes poetic phrases and verses in his diary about her looks despite the fact that she barely notices or interacts with him. She is also the owner of a lapdog, Medji, whom Poprishchin believes writes letters to another dog in the neighborhood. Some of Medji's letters, which are likely hallucinated by Poprishchin in his insanity, contain information about Sophie's life. Sophie is in love with a kammerjunker—a gentleman of low, but imperial, rank—and Poprishchin is angered to learn she will likely marry him. Medji's letter also indicates that Sophie thinks Poprishchin is unattractive, a fact that further infuriates him.

Medji and Fidèle – Medji and Fidèle are two dogs in Poprishchin's neighborhood. Medji is the lapdog of Sophie, who is the daughter of Poprishchin's boss. Fidèle's owner lives in a building owned by a man called Zverkov, whom Poprishchin scorns for having low-class tenants. When Poprishchin encounters Medji and Fidèle while he is out in town, he believes the two dogs are speaking to each other in human language. Medji and Fidèle discuss the letters they have sent to one another, and Poprishchin is intrigued by these letters' contents. He eventually goes to both Medji's and Fidèle's homes to steal the letters, which reveal details about the lives of the dogs' owners. Poprishchin does not realize that hearing Medji and Fidèle speak with human voices indicates serious mental disturbance; he is convinced that such things are normal. Poprishchin's interactions with Medji and Fidèle, therefore, illustrate the beginnings of his insanity.

The Section Chief – The section chief is one of Poprishchin's managers. The section chief is critical of Poprishchin's behavior and professionalism, pointing out Poprishchin's lack of career advancement despite being forty years old. The section chief is

also off put by Poprishchin's infatuation with the boss's daughter, Sophie, and brings attention to the class disparity between them. The section's chief criticism of Poprishchin's behavior is one of the only external insights into Poprishchin's character. His descriptions illustrate Poprishchin's professional failures, indicating that despite Poprishchin's lofty opinion of himself, he is actually an unproductive and inept worker.

The Director – The director is Poprishchin's boss and the father of Sophie, Poprishchin's love interest. Poprishchin believes the director is a very educated man because his office contains many books with foreign titles. The director barely speaks to Poprishchin, only occasionally making small talk about the weather; nevertheless, Poprishchin wishes he could start up a conversation with him. Poprishchin's interactions with the director illustrate the difference between his internal thoughts—verbose, analytical, and oftentimes judgmental—and his meek behavior.

Teplov – The love interest of Sophie, the director's daughter. Teplov is only described through the letters of Medji and Fidèle, so it unclear whether his existence is real, or only part of Poprishchin's hallucinations. Teplov is of a higher class than Poprishchin, which infuriates him, as it reinforces his belief that only the rich get rewarded in society.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Lord Chancellor/Grand Inquisitor – One of the staff members at the insane asylum, who physically tortures Poprishchin.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



SOCIAL CLASS AND STATUS

In Nikolai Gogol's "Diary of a Madman," the middling civil servant Aksenty Ivanovich Poprishchin gradually loses his sanity, resulting in his imprisonment at an asylum. Poprishchin's insanity is exacerbated by his fixation on social class and status—he spends much of the story resenting his peers for their positions in society. In fact, Poprishchin constantly comments on others' social status, even when he is merely traveling through town or doing errands. In Gogol's story, this constant stream of commentary turns into mania, leading to the swift deterioration of Poprishchin's mental state. Gogol's story thus warns readers that fixation on others' social class and status can lead to dangerous obsession, and even insanity.

Throughout the story, Gogol provides multiple examples of Poprishchin's fixation on his own class. In one scene, Poprishchin has an interaction with his section chief, a manager at his job, who points out that Poprishchin is "over forty" and that it's about time he "got smart" about his career. He tells Poprishchin to "take a look" at himself, as he is "a zero, nothing more." Poprishchin, unable to take this criticism of his status, instead believes the section chief is "envious," as Poprishchin sits in the "director's study." Due to his obsession with status, Poprishchin can only filter his manager's valid critique through the lens of status.

The section chief's questioning frustrates Poprishchin, and he mentally criticizes the section chief's face and hairstyle. Poprishchin is unable to deal with the section chief's questions in a levelheaded way, and instead assumes the section chief is "jealous" of him. He believes his manager perceives "the signs of benevolence" that are "preferentially bestowed" on him. Poprishchin seems to think his innate, imagined social status makes him better than his manager. Poprishchin then continues to obsess over the section chief's comments, and writes out a litany in his diary, asking, "Am I some sort of nobody?" Poprishchin goes on to claim he is "a nobleman" and "can earn rank." He continues to rage against the section chief's criticism in his diary and claims his "reputation" can become "even better" than his manager's reputation.

Poprishchin's obsession with social class and status is pervasive, extending beyond himself and his peers. Multiple scenes in the story emphasize how Poprishchin continuously judges and assesses everyone and everything around him through the lens of class. For example, when Poprishchin goes for a walk, his descriptions of the people around him are solely based on their social status. He emphasizes that he sees "only peasant women," "Russian merchants," and "messenger boys." He also points out that he only sees one person from "the gentry," who is a "fellow clerk." Even in casual encounters, Poprishchin focuses on strangers' status and constantly compares those strangers with himself.

In another mundane scene, Poprishchin continues to fixate on class and comment judgmentally on everything around him. When he goes on an errand that requires him to walk through a particular neighborhood, he points out that he "can't stand cabbage," a common food whose smell "comes pouring out" from the shops. Moreover, he claims there is a "whiff of hell" coming from "each house" that smells so foul that he has to hold his nose and run past. He also emphasizes that the "vile artisans" in the city produce "so much soot" that it is "impossible" for a "gentleman" to "walk there." Workers and strangers of every class, from artisans to cooks, draw his scorn.

Poprishchin not only comments on those he considers below his own status, but also fixates on the class and status of his superiors. He emphasizes the grace and intelligence of his director, pointing out how the director's books contain

"learning" that Poprishchin's "kind" cannot "come close to." Poprishchin does wish, in fact, that he could learn more from those with more social clout—he wants to see "what they do in their circle," to better inform his own behavior.

Poprishchin's obsession with social class, which dominates his work life and his casual encounters, eventually becomes an all-consuming mania. After reading a news article about a missing king in Spain, Poprishchin's preoccupation with status—and his unhappiness with his own social class—leads him to fantasize about cases of mistaken identity. Poprishchin begins to wish that he was "some sort of count," and claims there are many examples "in history" of men being "revealed" as a person of higher class. In his diary, he writes down his dream of being "promoted" to a role such as "governor general." Poprishchin's fixation on social status is so thorough that it leads him to imagine various scenarios where his true, higher social status is hidden, even from himself.

Amidst these dreams of mistaken identity, Poprishchin reads the newspaper and writes in his diary that there are "strange doings" in Spain, as Spain's "throne is vacant." In Poprishchin's perspective, which is dominated by class hierarchy, this vacancy is illogical and contrary to the natural order of things. The abnormality of Spain's missing king, combined with Poprishchin's obsession with class, eventually leads Poprishchin to believe that he is the lost heir, and he names himself **Ferdinand VIII**. He realizes in a "flash of lightning" that he is not a lowly "councillor," but instead a true nobleman. Poprishchin's inner torment over his middling social status has consumed him so thoroughly that he must make up cases of mistaken identity to remedy his unhappiness.

Throughout the story, Gogol reveals how thoroughly class and social status infiltrates Poprishchin's thoughts. Poprishchin's obsession expands from a self-directed fixation, eventually permeating his entire life and affecting both his career and his wellbeing. Ultimately, Poprishchin's unhappiness about his civil servant status leads him to spin a fantasy where he is a long-lost king, and it becomes clear that Poprishchin's obsession has driven him insane. Gogol seems to warn readers that constant comparison, judgment, and anxiety over one's status can lead to drastic consequences.



WRITING, ESCAPISM, AND FANTASY

Civil servant Aksenty Ivanovich Poprishchin spends his personal time writing in his diary, where he is able to express his true feelings. By contrast, his daily interactions, oftentimes brief and dull, do not accurately reflect his thoughts and aspirations. Despite providing a more accurate view of his internal state, however, Poprishchin's writing also presents a decidedly fantasized version of himself at odds with reality. In fact, writing allows Poprishchin to explore multiple fantasies: he imagines that two dogs are capable of writing letters to each other, and he writes many

diary entries claiming that he is a forgotten heir to the Spanish throne. Gogol's story illustrates how writing offers an escape and a space for fantasy?though these fantasies are sometimes misleading, grandiose, or damaging?for characters like Poprishchin, who live unhappy lives.

Gogol's story is written in the form of diary entries, a formatting choice that emphasizes how important writing is in Poprishchin's life. These entries, a form of escape for Poprishchin, reveal his inner monologue to be more judgmental and verbose than his day-to-day speech. For example, Poprishchin's behavior at work is markedly different from his internal thoughts. Poprishchin holds little authority in his job, but he is often dismissive of his superiors when he writes about them in his diary. He describes his section chief as a "cursed stork," and claims that the treasurer is a miserly and dictatorial colleague, even though in the treasurer's home "his own cook slaps him" and rejects his authority. Poprishchin never verbalizes this scornful commentary, however—he only expresses these thoughts in writing.

This mismatch in Poprishchin's written and spoken language continues with other figures in his life. Besides using his diary for secret expression of his scorn, Poprishchin also uses his entries to express hidden, happier emotions. He is infatuated with the director's daughter, Sophie, and writes about her with fond, poetic language—noting, for instance, that she descends from her carriage "like a little bird" and comparing "her glance" to "the sun." When Sophie talks directly to him, however, Poprishchin is monosyllabic in response.

In another scene illustrating Popishchin's sheepishness, he is unable to talk to the director at his job. Poprishchin insists that he has "several times" intended "to strike up a conversation" with the director, a man he considers "a real statesman." He writes in his diary that he wishes he could learn the "equivocations and courtly tricks" of men like the director. These written entries reveal Poprishchin's true thoughts, illustrating his high-class aspirations and his belief that he can learn what elite men "do in their circle." The self-assurance, sense of superiority, and keen observations depicted in Poprishchin's diary are complete fabrications, however; in reality, Poprishchin is barely able to speak to the director, and does not, despite his wishes, ever attempt to start a conversation on noble etiquette.

Gogol continues to populate the story with scenes showing writing to be a form of both genuine expression and fantasy. In one encounter, Poprishchin runs an errand and sees Sophie, who has left her lapdog Medji outside while she conducts her trip. Poprishchin believes he hears Medji "speak in human language" to another dog, Fidèle. Medji claims she has written a letter to Fidèle, revealing that, even in Poprishchin's unrealistic fantasy, he focuses on writing as a form of self-expression. In Poprishchin's world—where writing is a vehicle for expressing true thoughts—dogs that behave like humans must also write

like humans.

Poprishchin later travels to Fidèle's home and steals some "little papers" from the dog. He believes these papers will "reveal everything," such as "political relations" and the true feelings of Sophie, his beloved. Poprishchin's hope that the letters will disclose secret information is an escapist fantasy; the letters' made-up contents are not likely to enlighten him. In fact, the letters only reveal Poprishchin's paranoia; they depict an obsession with class and status, indicating that he likely hallucinated their existence in the first place. One of the dog's letters discusses Poprishchin's physical qualities scornfully, and he thinks it is the work of his envious coworkers. Another letter reveals Sophie's infatuation with another man, who belongs to a higher class than Poprishchin. Even in Poprishchin's fantasies, expressed through these made-up letters, his fixation on status and reputation leads to overt paranoia. Like his diary entries, then, the dogs' letters allow Poprishchin to spin fantasies and express his hidden mania.

To distract himself from the letters, Poprishchin reads a story in the newspaper which discusses how Spain's "throne is vacant" and how "a queen" will "ascend" if no heir is found. In his diary, he begins to fixate on this state of affairs, as a kingdom must have a king. Eventually, Poprishchin is so obsessed with the mystery of the missing king that he starts claiming he is "that king." Poprishchin's fantasy is so thorough that he even imagines it is a day in the distant future and dates his entry to the "year 2000." Poprishchin's entries become an escape route for him, allowing him to fantasize that he is not living life as a miserable "councillor," but as a lost heir to a distant throne. The headlines, too, provide Poprishchin an escape from his life, and an outlet through which to express his madness.

After Poprishchin concludes that he is Spain's lost king, he gains the courage to act rebellious at his office. Poprishchin's fantasy has kept him away from work for "three weeks," and he returns only "as a joke." When documents are "placed in front" of him, he merely signs them "**Ferdinand VIII.**" Through this signature—fittingly, an act of writing—Poprishchin finally expresses the hidden sense of superiority he feels for his coworkers.

In Gogol's story, writing is vital to Poprishchin inner life and his only true form of expression. Poprishchin's diary entries allow him to express criticism and social commentary that he is too timid to say aloud. His writing also allows him to create a fantasized version of himself, who can interact gracefully with his superiors and learn their ways through observation. While this fantasized version of Poprishchin never translates off the pages of his diary, he nevertheless feels a sense of self-assurance and superiority via its imagining. Poprishchin's final diary entries allow him to live out his fondest wish: to be a highborn citizen, greater and more respected than his peers. Although Poprishchin's writing is mainly fantastical and tinged with madness, it nevertheless allows him to escape from his

lowly circumstances.



INSANITY

In “Diary of a Madman,” Gogol chronicles how Aksenty Ivanovich Poprishchin slowly descends into madness and is imprisoned in an insane asylum. Poprishchin begins the story seeming relatively ordinary, but his insanity soon manifests in multiple forms. For example, he believes that dogs can speak in human language and that they are capable of writing letters. Eventually, he suffers delusions of grandeur, and begins to believe he is a lost king of Spain. Gogol juxtaposes Poprishchin’s insanity—which results from common feelings like inferiority and envy—with moments of rationality, illustrating how imperceptible the line between madness and normalcy can be.

Gogol provides readers with various scenes that illustrate Poprishchin’s sanity, emphasizing his commonplace dissatisfaction with his career and station in life. Initially, Poprishchin is portrayed as a common workingman, a low-level clerk who mentally insults his colleagues and shirks his responsibilities. He admits to not wanting to go “to the office at all,” and thinks his coworkers are “envious” because he sits in the “director’s study.” Poprishchin’s inner monologue is petty but commonplace and does not reveal anything other than an overinflated sense of self-importance. In fact, Poprishchin’s commentary often reads like innocuous gossip. He discusses how in the “provincial government,” the buildings are dirty but the workers can rent a “country house” or wear a “beaver coat.” He admits that if it was not for the “nobility of the work” he would have “quit” his job a while ago. These observations and concerns, while indicative of Poprishchin’s unhappiness, do not reveal an inner madness or mania.

Gogol then slowly introduces scenes that illustrate Poprishchin’s insanity, juxtaposing them with other scenes of normality to show how subtle these shifts in Poprishchin’s perspective can seem. When Poprishchin runs an errand in town, he believes he hears one dog, named Medji, speaking with another dog, Fidèle. At first, Poprishchin is “very surprised” to hear the dog speak in “human language,” but he soon loses his sense of astonishment. Instead, he claims there have been “many such examples” of animals speaking in human languages. This sudden change in opinion begins to illustrate how quickly his thoughts go from rational to irrational.

Poprishchin then reveals that he has “begun” to “hear and see things” that “no one” else has experienced before. A few days after believing he has heard Medji and Fidèle speaking to one another, he convinces himself to “get hold” of the letters “exchanged” by the dogs. Eventually, Poprishchin retrieves the letters and begins to read them to himself. He admits there is “something doggy” in the letters, as they discuss ideas such as food and being petted. While the premise of the letters is clearly fantastical, these details lend them a sense of realism.

Poprishchin’s ability to highlight unrealistic versus believable details blurs the boundary between reality and madness.

Poprishchin’s ability to discern reality from fantasy weakens further as the story continues. Poprishchin reads of “strange doings” in Spain, where the “throne is vacant” and there are rumors that a queen will ascend if an heir is not found. Poprishchin is unusually disturbed by this news and writes in his diary that “it cannot be” that Spain has “no king.” Poprishchin’s fixation on social status and hierarchy begins to reveal the mania that shapes his thoughts.

Poprishchin eventually begins to have delusions of grandeur, believing that he is the lost king of Spain; he names his royal alter ego **Ferdinand VIII**. He dresses himself up in **tattered robes** and announces his royal status to his housekeeper. This rapid descent into insanity leads him to lose his job, and he is taken away to the “Spanish border”—which is actually an insane asylum—by people he believes are “Spanish deputies.” Poprishchin can no longer separate reality from fantasy, indicating the depth of his insanity.

Poprishchin’s condition continues to deteriorate, but his belief in his royal status skews his rationality. When the staff of the asylum shaves his head and drips “cold water” on his head, he believes he is the victim of an unusual type of popular ritual, or “court etiquette.” His writing, paradoxically, reveals the truth of his miserable situation while maintaining his fantasy. Poprishchin understands that his treatment is unfair, but his fantasy of kingship keeps him from realizing why he is being treated poorly. Poprishchin inevitably fails to make sense of his surroundings, even though the truth of those surroundings is clear in his writing. He is ultimately unable to tell that his fantasies are false, a mark of his madness.

In Gogol’s story, the protagonist Poprishchin slowly loses his grasp of reality. While his commentary initially sounds like the complaints of an everyday worker, he eventually reveals how he hears voices and believes himself to be royalty. Gogol lists various scenes from Poprishchin’s perspective that are both realistic and fantastical to illustrate how quickly a character’s thoughts can shift between normality and madness.



ISOLATION

Aksenty Ivanovich Poprishchin, an embittered and judgmental clerk, dislikes many of his coworkers and fixates on his low social status. Despite his verbose and critical inner monologue, which he records in his diary, Poprishchin’s outward persona is quiet and reserved. Poprishchin’s inability to talk to his peers and his judgmental stance prevent him from truly connecting with anyone. This total isolation leads to the rapid deterioration of his sanity, and he starts to imagine he is the lost king of Spain; his imagined royalty, in turn, helps him justify his separation from other people. Isolation, in Gogol’s story, is a powerful force that, if

unchecked, can push people more deeply into the life of the mind for better or for worse, encouraging the creation of fantasy worlds as a means to find a sense of connection and belonging.

Gogol provides readers with many examples of Poprishchin's dismissive internal commentary, emphasizing his inability to relate to his coworkers or peers. Initially, Poprishchin is introduced to readers a low-level clerk who scorns his colleagues. He describes his section chief as a "cursed stork," and dismisses the treasurer as stingy and authoritarian. Poprishchin's commentary lacks a single positive thought for his peers and extends to total strangers, indicating that even remote passersby are not exempt from his judgmental worldview. He has only pessimistic views of the clerks in the provincial government, and comments on their "vile" **clothes** and how they act "goody-goody." When he meets a "fellow clerk" at an intersection, he judges the clerk for "ogling" a woman, insinuating the clerk is a superficial flirt. Poprishchin has no thoughts of sympathy or understanding for anyone, regardless of their relation to him.

Gogol then illustrates how Poprishchin's inner commentary, which is sarcastic and scornful, does not actually align with his outwardly shy behavior. When Poprishchin's boss, the director, tries to make small talk about the weather, Poprishchin's response is short and dull, despite the in-depth observations he makes in his diary about his boss's character. He admits he has tried "several times" to start a conversation with the director, but his "tongue wouldn't obey" him. Poprishchin is also unable to share his amorous feelings with Sophie, the object of his affection. Poprishchin writes about his feelings with poetic language and eloquence, yet when Sophie asks him a question directly he only responds, "No, ma'am." This incongruity between his private thoughts and his public actions reveals how little of his true personality Poprishchin reveals to others; he has completely hidden his feelings from the world, only revealing them through writing. Such a discrepancy keeps Poprishchin's real character from being revealed to others, isolating him further.

Poprishchin, who is completely isolated from his peers, is then driven mad by his fixation on social status; he begins to believe he is Spain's lost king, **Ferdinand VIII**. Poprishchin's alienation from society is so thorough, it seems, that his hallucinations become his only means of interpreting his surroundings. He is taken to an insane asylum, imagining that "Spanish deputies" have come to retrieve him. He is then beaten but justifies this treatment by imagining it is a "knightly custom." When the asylum's workers shave off his hair and begin "dripping cold water" on his head, he assumes he "fallen into the hands" of the "Inquisition." The staff's actions further alienate and isolate Poprishchin, leading him to believe—mistakenly—that he is being persecuted as part of a historical plot.

This treatment eventually does begin to torment Poprishchin.

His isolation is so thorough that he asks to be carried "out of this world." He then imagines that he sees his mother "sitting" by a window and exclaims that there is "no place for him." Poprishchin's fantasy of royal blood, which temporarily protected him from recognizing his miserable fate, eventually fades. As a result, Poprishchin momentarily becomes aware of his total isolation from society. Poprishchin's brief acknowledgment that he is utterly alone thereby provides a moment of deep self-realization amidst his delusion and mania. In "Diary of a Madman," the split between Poprishchin's inner thoughts and outward behavior isolates him from other people. Eventually, this lack of connection—combined with his fixation on status—leads him into madness. Gogol highlights how madness at first protects Poprishchin from realizing his isolation. Eventually, however, Poprishchin's sense of alienation is so thorough that it breaks through his fantasy of mistaken identity. He ultimately begins to realize there is "no place" for him "in the world." Isolation, a powerful force, has brought Poprishchin to the depths of insanity, but has also provided him a moment of true clarity about his miserable life.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



FERDINAND VIII

Ferdinand VIII is the made-up heir to the throne of Spain, and Poprishchin's alter ego after he officially descends into insanity. After reading headlines in the newspaper, Poprishchin hears that Spain is missing a king and comes to believe he is the lost heir. Ferdinand VIII, as an alter ego, represents both Poprishchin's desire to escape his circumstances and the fantasy of high-class freedom; although the identity is completely fabricated, it allows Poprishchin a sense of imaginary agency and authority.

By naming himself Ferdinand VIII, Poprishchin seeks to justify his unhappiness and separation from the world? a case of mistaken identity lets him avoid the reality and loneliness of his lackluster life. Poprishchin's inability to fit into society has caused him to suffer from isolation and mania, but his creation of a mistaken identity allows him to rationalize that sense of disconnect without acknowledging the reality of his circumstances. In naming himself a king, moreover, Poprishchin is able to invent himself anew. He has always envied high-class status and believes his low social ranking has prevented him from everything he has desired, such as wealth and the attention of Sophie, his love interest. Thus Ferdinand VIII further comes to symbolize the promise of happiness and prosperity that Poprishchin believes is inherent to upper-class existence.



ATTIRE AND CLOTHING

Poprishchin's fixation on social class and status makes him very judgmental of other people. His judgment often extends to others' clothing, and various diary entries reference what people are wearing to illustrate their relative stature in society. When Poprishchin is walking through town and runs into Sophie, his love interest, he is embarrassed by the overcoat he is wearing, as it is outdated and dirty. When Poprishchin descends into madness and believes himself to be the long-lost king of Spain, he is hesitant to reveal himself initially, as he does not think he has a suitably royal outfit befitting his position. Clothing, to Poprishchin, is thus a symbol of social status and wealth; having the appropriate attire is crucial to being considered high-class and important.

Clothing is not, however, only the measure of one's place in society; it also reveals its wearer's true self in the story. When Poprishchin tailors himself a mantle to match his newfound status as king, he believes it to be appropriately royal, but it is really just fabric that he has torn haphazardly with scissors. His clothing, then, reveals his true mental state: he is not, in fact, a long-lost and royal king, but a man whose delusions have led him to believe in a fantasy. Clothing, then, can reveal both a person's social standing, and is indicative of deeper psychological characteristics.

preoccupation with social status. Poprishchin discusses how his workplace, in comparison to the provincial government's quarters, is "clean everywhere" and more respectable. His comparison even extends to the quality of the tables: in his office, they are "mahogany"?a luxury befitting a more respected office?and his superiors are more "formal" than their counterparts in the provinces. Poprishchin's observations illustrate a clear interest in hierarchy, formality, and stateliness. Because his job has these qualities, he believes his role is reputable.

Moreover, it is important to him that the respectability of his workplace is not present in similar jobs, as it indicates that, comparatively, he is better off than his provincial analogues. By highlighting this comparison?which portrays him in a self-important light?Poprishchin begins to reveal how his fixation on status supersedes other, more common career considerations, such as how much money he makes. He is interested in the job not because it is fulfilling, or impressive in terms of income, but because it will earn him respect and make him seem noble.

☞ Ah, you pup! I confess, I was very surprised to hear her speak in human language. But later, when I'd thought it over properly, I at once ceased to be surprised... I confess, lately I had begun sometimes to hear and see things no one had ever seen or heard before.

Related Characters: Aksenty Ivanovich Poprishchin (speaker), Medji and Fidèle

Related Themes:

Page Number: 281

Explanation and Analysis

Poprishchin recounts an interaction he overhears between two dogs, Medji and Fidèle; he believes he hears them speaking to each other in human language. At first, Poprishchin is merely surprised to hear the dogs speaking like humans, indicating that he thinks the situation is unusual. He does not, however, dismiss the situation as impossible or invent an alternate explanation for what he perceived, which reveals his abnormal and illogical perception of reality. Soon after, Poprishchin forgets his surprise completely and begins to accept that this conversation between dogs is part of his reality. Poprishchin's lack of acknowledgment that dogs cannot speak like humans is the first indication in the story that he is not completely sane.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *The Collected Tales of Nikolai Gogol* published in 1999.

October 3 Quotes

☞ It's true, our work is noble, it's clean everywhere, as you never see it in the provincial government: the tables are mahogany, and the superiors address each other formally. Yes, I confess, if it weren't for the nobility of the work, I'd long since have quit the department.

Related Characters: Aksenty Ivanovich Poprishchin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 280

Explanation and Analysis

In Poprishchin's first diary entry, he emphasizes the prominence and nobility of his job, illustrating his

When Poprishchin confesses that he is hearing and seeing things that “no one” else has experienced, it’s an indication not only that he is insane, but also that he is prone to delusions of grandeur. These delusions are another indication of his self-aggrandizing personality: he believes that he alone has “seen or heard” fantastical things. Poprishchin’s conviction that he is the only one to hear and see certain scenes, combined with his acceptance of a completely irrational situation, provides concrete examples of Poprishchin’s burgeoning insanity.

like him. So he simultaneously defers to the authority of the upper classes while maintaining delusions of grandeur by imagining himself to be favored by those he considers superior.

☞ Heavens above, how she was dressed! Her gown was white as a swan, and so magnificent... “Your Excellency,” I almost wanted to say, “don’t punish me, but if it is your will to punish me, punish me with Your Excellency’s own hand.” But, devil take it, my tongue somehow refused to move...

October 4 Quotes

☞ Our director must be a very intelligent man. His whole study is filled with bookcases. I read the titles of some of the books: it’s all learning, such learning as our kind can’t even come close to... A real statesman. I notice, though, that he has a special liking for me. If only the daughter also...

Related Characters: Aksenty Ivanovich Poprishchin (speaker), Sophie, The Director

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 282

Explanation and Analysis

Poprishchin believes that the director is an “intelligent man” because his study is filled with books whose titles are complex, which Poprishchin believes are markers of superiority. Poprishchin’s concept of status seems, therefore, to extend beyond wealth: just like in his valuation of his job, Poprishchin prioritizes respectability over income. His opinion of the director’s social class is tied to his belief in the director’s intelligence, a quality that commands respect. Poprishchin also reveals that his view of social status is built upon a belief in the intellectual superiority of the higher classes: he emphasizes that people of lower classes cannot “come close” to the same level of “learning.” Revealingly, he groups himself with the lower “kind,” and is extremely deferential to the director. By highlighting his act of deference, he seems to flatter his own sense of perception and good judgment.

Despite acknowledging that he is of a lower class than the director, Poprishchin believes that the director has a “special liking” for him?but offers no proof of this fact. Poprishchin’s fixation on social status seems to blind him to the actual role he occupies both in society and in relation to his boss: he thinks, despite belonging to a lower class that works under its superiors, that he is valued above others

Related Characters: Aksenty Ivanovich Poprishchin (speaker), Sophie

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 282

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Poprishchin discusses his hidden feelings for Sophie. He also demonstrates the difference between his true thoughts, which are verbose and overdramatic, and his actual speech, which is shy and brief. This divergence between Poprishchin’s thoughts and deeds forms a pattern that repeats throughout the story, illustrating his inability to truly connect with anyone.

Poprishchin writes about Sophie in his diary with romantic language; moreover, he fantasizes about delivering overly poetic responses. When he actually interacts with Sophie, however, Poprishchin is shy and quiet, and he hides his true feelings. This contrast illustrates the isolation that defines Poprishchin’s social life. Poprishchin is only capable of revealing his thoughts in his diary; he uses writing as a form of emotional escapism, as he is incapable of connecting with others and expressing his emotions. This lack of connection, which alienates Poprishchin from his peers, seems to frustrate him: he knows he is capable of grand forms of expression, and he even daydreams about what he wants to say. Still, he finds himself unable to actually verbalize his imagined phrases.

November 6 Quotes

☞ “You’re over forty— it’s time you got smart. What are you dreaming of? Do you think I don’t know all your pranks? You’re dangling after the director’s daughter! Well, take a look at yourself, only think, what are you? You’re a zero, nothing more. You haven’t got a kopeck to your name.”

Related Characters: The Section Chief (speaker), Aksenty Ivanovich Poprishchin, Sophie

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 283

Explanation and Analysis

This passage describes an interaction Poprishchin has with his section chief, a manager at his office. This interaction is one of the few scenes in the story that provides another character's perspective into Poprishchin's behavior; it both deflates Poprishchin's overstated sense of importance, and illustrates how Poprishchin has been singled out for critique.

The section chief's criticism is based in reality, but phrased in a mean-spirited and persecutory way. The section chief's criticism, then, contributes to Poprishchin's alienation, and illustrates his role as a target of scorn at his office. Still, these critiques serve as useful counterpoints to Poprishchin's self-aggrandizement; they highlight the flaws and fallacies in Poprishchin's self-perception. Despite Poprishchin's belief that his role is respectable and that he is a favorite, others clearly view him as a "zero" with no money to his name. Poprishchin's alienation, then, is partly a self-created problem: his inflated opinion of himself contributes to his isolation from his peers, but this isolation is compounded by his coworker's disdain.

 I see why he's angry with me. He's jealous. Maybe he saw the signs of benevolence preferentially bestowed on me... Wait, friend! we, too, will become a colonel and, God willing, maybe something even higher. We'll get ourselves a reputation even better than yours.

Related Characters: Aksenty Ivanovich Poprishchin (speaker), The Section Chief

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 283–284

Explanation and Analysis

Poprishchin writes an angry tirade against his section chief in his diary, illustrating how social status both contributes to his isolation from others and warps his perspective. When the section chief comments on Poprishchin's habits, Poprishchin lashes out: he claims he can "get" a "reputation" that is "better," and begins to conceptualize his relationship with his coworker as a competition. This competitive

attitude is a result of Poprishchin's overinflated sense of self-importance: he misattributes the section chief's comments to jealousy rather than genuine malice or dissatisfaction. Poprishchin's belief in his preferential treatment reinforces his sense of superiority, leading him to further separate and isolate himself from his coworker.

Blinded by his perspective, Poprishchin does not realize that his supervisor's comments contain some justifiable critiques. Instead, Poprishchin's self-aggrandizing personality forces him to dismiss any treatment that contradicts his lofty opinion of himself. Poprishchin's self-perception has been warped by his fixation with status: he seems unable to understand how his section chief truly views him, and instead believes he is more high-class.

November 11 Quotes

 I've meant several times to strike up a conversation with His Excellency, only, devil take it, my tongue wouldn't obey me: I'd just say it was cold or warm outside, and be decidedly unable to say anything else. I'd like to peek into the drawing room, where you sometimes see only an open door into yet another room beyond the drawing room. Ah, such rich furnishings!

Related Characters: Aksenty Ivanovich Poprishchin (speaker), The Director

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 285

Explanation and Analysis

Another interaction between Poprishchin and his boss illustrates Poprishchin's reliance on writing as his sole form of self-expression. Despite his intention to "strike up" a conversation with his boss, whom he admires as a social superior, Poprishchin often feels "unable to say" anything; he reverts to banal social niceties, cowed by the director's stature. Moreover, Poprishchin's outsized sense of self-importance—which manifests in his writing as unproven confidence in his reputation—completely disappears when he tries to verbally interact with his superiors. Writing, therefore, is an outlet for expressing Poprishchin's fantasy version of himself.

In addition, Poprishchin wishes he could "peek into" the homes of his superiors to get a better understanding of how they live. Poprishchin's idolization of the higher social classes is so thorough that he considers even the physical markers of status to be tantalizing yet incomprehensible mysteries to a man of his background. He believes he must

spy on higher-class people to learn how they conduct their lives, as it foreign and unknown to men like him.

December 3 Quotes

☝ So what if he's a kammerjunker. It's nothing more than a dignity; it's not anything visible that you can take in your hands. Several times already I've tried to figure out where all these differences come from. What makes me a titular councillor, and why on earth am I a titular councillor? [...] Maybe I myself don't know who I am.

Related Characters: Aksenty Ivanovich Poprishchin (speaker), Teplov, Medji and Fidèle

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 292

Explanation and Analysis

Poprishchin learns from the dogs' letter that Sophie is marrying Teplov, a higher-class man. Poprishchin agonizes over this revelation and tries to understand whether real differences exist between himself and Teplov that justify Sophie's decision. Despite Poprishchin's fixation with class throughout the story, this passage is the first indication that Poprishchin understands that social status is intangible and "nothing more than a dignity."

Poprishchin's recognition that status is a societal construct does not, however, mitigate his obsession with improving his own social class. He uses his diary, his one vehicle for true expression, to express a new fantasy: he begins to believe he is secretly someone else, a delusion that is completely uncorroborated. This new delusion, prompted by the emotionally fraught realization that Sophie is marrying someone else, represents Poprishchin's growing separation from reality and is a new manifestation of his burgeoning insanity.

The Year 2000, 43rd of April Quotes

☝ Spain has a king. He has been found. I am that king. Only this very day did I learn of it. I confess, it came to me suddenly in a flash of lightning. I don't understand how I could have thought and imagined that I was a titular councillor.

Related Characters: Aksenty Ivanovich Poprishchin (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 294

Explanation and Analysis

This passage illustrates Poprishchin's definitive descent into insanity, as his fixation with the story of Spain's king turns into a full-fledged delusion. Throughout the story, Poprishchin has expressed frustration with his life as a lowly clerk: the news of Sophie's impending marriage then exacerbates his obsession with social class as, ultimately, Poprishchin feels he has lost Sophie to Teplov, a wealthier man. This frustration with his social reputation, combined with his escapist fantasies of mistaken identity, results in an overt episode of insanity.

Poprishchin realizes in a "flash of lightning" that he is Spain's lost king, and casts away his identity as a poor clerk. To Poprishchin, whose inner life is expressed solely through writing and made up of fantasies and daydreams, this delusion is impossible to distinguish from reality. His madness leads him to believe that he is forgotten royalty?an illogical story taken directly from a headline in the news. In his fantasy, which he elaborates through his diary entries, he finally becomes the successful, high-class man he has always wished to be.

The 86th of Martober Quotes

☝ They said the director was coming. Many clerks ran up front to show themselves before him. But I didn't budge... What is a director that I should stand up before him... I was most amused when they slipped me a paper to be signed. They thought I'd write "Chief Clerk So-and-So"... Not a chance! In the central place, where the director of the department signs, I dashed off: "Ferdinand VIII."

Related Characters: Aksenty Ivanovich Poprishchin (speaker), The Director

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 295

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Poprishchin's continued belief that he is Spanish royalty gives him a false sense of power. When the director?a man Poprishchin previously idolized?comes to the office, Poprishchin claims that he does not need to "stand up before" the director. Poprishchin fully believes in his nobility and scoffs at the other clerks' deferent behavior.

His insanity has led him to feel secure in his sense of unearned superiority over his coworkers. Poprishchin's delusions lead him to believe he has achieved high-class status, allowing him to finally act on his illusory sense of self-importance.

Poprishchin continues to act out his fantasy by refusing to sign documents with his real name and title. Instead, he writes the signature of his royal alter ego, Ferdinand VIII. This signature serves as a written expression and validation of his delusions, and is an act of defiance against his coworkers, whom he has always found disrespectful. Through writing, then, Poprishchin continues to live out his escapist dreams of superiority. Although he once kept his claims of self-importance hidden in his diary, he is now able to express his true contempt for his colleagues.

dependent on external validation of his respectability; without others acknowledging his nobility, he claims his title has “no weight.”

Don't remember the date. Quotes

☝☝ The mantle is all ready and sewn up. Mavra cried out when I put it on. However, I still refrain from presenting myself at court. No deputation from Spain so far. Without deputies it's not proper. There'll be no weight to my dignity.

Related Characters: Aksenty Ivanovich Poprishchin (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 296

Explanation and Analysis

Poprishchin's inability to recall the date likely indicates that his insanity has usurped his understanding of time. Despite this all-consuming insanity, however, parts of Poprishchin's personality are still intact. For example, Poprishchin still pays close attention to physical signs of social class, such as clothing. Poprishchin insists on having the proper outfit to befit his royal status, so he sets out to create the appropriate wardrobe. He makes a “mantle,” unaware that, to others, it simply looks like the cut up tatters of his old uniform. When his cleaning woman sees it, she interprets it as a sign of his insanity; Poprishchin, however, is lost in his delusion and thinks that his outward appearance is properly dignified.

Poprishchin is also still fixated on social hierarchy, and insists that it is improper to present himself as the king “at court” if no one has officially visited him. Despite his delusions, Poprishchin's view of social class is still highly

January of the same year Quotes

☝☝ I still cannot understand what sort of country Spain is. The popular customs and court etiquette are absolutely extraordinary... they began dripping cold water on my head. I've never experienced such hell before... Judging by all probabilities, I guess I may have fallen into the hands of the Inquisition, and the one I took for the chancellor may be the grand inquisitor himself.

Related Characters: Aksenty Ivanovich Poprishchin (speaker), Lord Chancellor/Grand Inquisitor

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 298

Explanation and Analysis

Poprishchin's illogical perception of time, a byproduct of his insanity, continues in this diary entry: he writes that January now comes after February in the calendar. Poprishchin's entry goes on to describe his current location, which he believes to be “Spain.” It is obvious from his recounting of the “popular customs,” however, that Poprishchin's mental illness has led to his imprisonment in an insane asylum. This imprisonment further isolates Poprishchin; previously, his alienation was due, in part, to his own sense of superiority and inability to connect. His insanity, however, now renders him incompatible with society: he cannot hold a job, nor is he capable of living his life rationally.

Poprishchin's obsession with social custom persists alongside his insanity, continuing to warp his perception. Poprishchin realizes that the act of dripping water on someone's head is a type of torture; still, he mistakenly believes that the Spanish Inquisition has captured him. Poprishchin chooses to believe he is a victim of a historical plot, and does not understand that he is actually an inmate at an asylum. His madness prevents him from seeing the misfortune of his situation; instead, it merely fuels his continuing delusions of nobility, lending his persecution a sense and backstory of historical gravity.

The of 34 February th Quotes

☝☝ Is that my mother sitting at the window? Dear mother, save your poor son! shed a tear on his sick head! see how they torment him! press the poor orphan to your breast! there's no place for him in the world! they're driving him out! [...] And do you know that the Dey of Algiers has a bump just under his nose?

Related Characters: Aksenty Ivanovich Poprishchin (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 300

Explanation and Analysis

Poprishchin's insanity persists, as illustrated by his continuing inability to discern date and time. He believes it is the "year 349," though his thinking is so impaired that he misspells the word "year," and does not realize that the 34th day of a month is nonexistent. Poprishchin's mental illness is

momentarily interrupted by a moment of clarity, in which he finally understands the extent of his isolation.

Unfortunately, this clarity is inspired by another hallucination, indicating that Poprishchin is unable to truly escape his delusions. Poprishchin imagines that he sees his "mother" and calls out to her for help, as he finally becomes aware that the asylum staff is deliberately torturing him. In addition, he starts to recognize his alienated condition, realizing that there is "no place for him" in society.

It is unclear, however, whether he truly understands the gravity of his situation. Although he acknowledges his isolation by recognizing that society is "driving him out," he does not indicate that he is aware of his placement in an asylum. This partial moment of clarity then ends soon after it begins, and Poprishchin returns to his paranoid delusions. These rapid mood swings are ultimately a sign of Poprishchin's inability to remain sane. Although he becomes briefly aware of his isolation, a respite from his delusions, this reprieve is only momentary and fleeting.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

OCTOBER 3

Aksenty Ivanovich Poprishchin, a low-level clerk, describes his innermost thoughts through diary entries. Having woken up late for work, he rushes to the office. He knows his manager, the section chief, will berate him for being late, as he has criticized Poprishchin for other professional mistakes before. Poprishchin relates a previous argument he had with the section chief, in which he accused Poprishchin of confusing “a case” and pointed out that the “date or number” was left off the paperwork.

Poprishchin then shares judgmental commentary about the coworkers in his office. He points out that the treasurer at his office is miserly, and that in the provincial courts, business is conducted differently. Poprishchin describes the type of “country house” a provincial worker rents, and the type of “beaver coat” they wear. Poprishchin then adds that the “nobility” of his career is what appeals to him.

Poprishchin goes out for a walk with his old coat and umbrella, and comments on the “peasant women” he sees in the street, as well as the “Russian merchants” and “messenger boys.” He also notices a “fellow clerk” from the “gentry,” whom he believes is shirking his work and merely “ogling” the feet of a woman in front of him.

He then notices a carriage pull up to the shop, and realizes it belongs to his boss, the director. The director’s daughter, Sophie, has taken the carriage to go shopping, and when she gets out of the vehicle, Poprishchin poetically comments that she “flutter[s]” like a “little bird.” Sophie does not recognize or acknowledge him, Poprishchin believes, because he is wearing his “old-fashioned” and “dirty” overcoat.

Gogol’s story is told through diary entries, a perspective that offers a biased view into Poprishchin’s character. Counteracting this, however, is Poprishchin’s willingness to write down his interactions in vivid detail—as such allowing readers to interpret the situations at hand for themselves. Here, readers can surmise that he has had professional troubles with his manager frequently.



After revealing his difficult relationship with the section chief, Poprishchin begins criticizing his coworkers. His comments illustrate the troubled nature of his professional relationships. Poprishchin’s fixation with social class has likely exacerbated these troubles: he is obsessed with status, and constantly compares himself to his peers. Doing so isolates him, and he acknowledges that it is the dignity of his profession that sustains him, not camaraderie.



Poprishchin’s fixation on social class is so thorough that it shapes how he thinks about total strangers. When Poprishchin runs into a clerk, someone of equal rank to him, he dismisses him because he believes the other clerk is avoiding work by chasing women. Poprishchin’s obsession with social class keeps him from treating other people with openness; as a result, he is socially isolated, and constantly wrapped up in judgmental thoughts.



Poprishchin notices that Sophie, the daughter of his boss, is shopping in town. Poprishchin is infatuated with Sophie and writes about her with poetic language; this is a change from how he describes other people. Even when he is praising Sophie’s charms, however, Poprishchin’s class fixation is present: he believes she does not recognize him because his coat is dirty, the mark of a poorer man. Even when he is in love, then, Poprishchin thinks about relationships through the lens of social status.



Poprishchin notices that Sophie has left her dog outside while she shops. He remembers that he “knows” the dog, whose name is Medji. Suddenly, Poprishchin hears a voice greet Medji, and he then hears Medji say to another dog, Fidèle, that she has been “very sick.” Poprishchin wonders if he is “drunk,” and admits he is “surprised” to hear Medji speak “in human language.”

Poprishchin soon rationalizes Medji’s human speech, writing in his diary that there have “already been many such examples” of talking animals. Poprishchin then recounts that Medji claimed to have written a letter to another dog, Fidèle. Poprishchin is initially surprised, as he has “never” heard of a dog “being able to write.” He then confesses in his diary that he has “begun” to “hear and see” things that no one else has.

OCTOBER 4

Poprishchin begins a running commentary on the personality of his boss, the director. He believes the director is a “very intelligent man” because his whole study is filled with bookcases. He also believes the director has a “special liking” for him, and reveals that he wishes the director’s daughter, Sophie, felt similarly warm towards him.

Sophie then enters the study, and Poprishchin jumps to attention. He thinks she is “magnificent,” and when she speaks, he compares her voice to a “canary.” Sophie asks if her father has stopped by, and Poprishchin thinks of a gracious, lofty phrase meant to impress her. But instead of saying it aloud, he only answers, “No, ma’am.”

Sophie then leaves the room, and a lackey comes in and dismisses Poprishchin from his duties for the day. Poprishchin mentally criticizes him for his lack of manners. He points out how the “knaves” once offered him “some snuff” but did not bother to get up, despite the fact that Poprishchin is a “man of noble birth.”

When Sophie enters the shop, she leaves her dog Medji outside. Poprishchin suddenly hears voices, and believes that Medji is speaking to another dog, Fidèle. At first, Poprishchin is disturbed to hear these voices and wonders if he is drunk. Poprishchin’s rationale provides a somewhat believable excuse for why he might think two dogs are able to talk like humans.



Poprishchin then changes his mind and claims that the dogs’ use of human language is logical. He explains that there are many examples of animals speaking like humans. Poprishchin then admits that he is seeing and hearing things. This admission is the first sign of Poprishchin’s insanity: he is confessing to hearing voices and hallucinating, both indicators of mental illness.



Poprishchin writes a diary entry about his boss, the director. As he is still constantly attuned to markers of high status, Poprishchin assumes that the number of books in the director’s study means he is an educated man. He also believes that the director has a fondness for him. Poprishchin does not provide proof for either of these claims, but his diary offers no alternative viewpoints. Poprishchin’s written fantasies remain uncorroborated.



Sophie enters her father’s study, and Poprishchin returns to the poetic language of his infatuation. When Sophie directly addresses Poprishchin, however, he does not verbalize any of his thoughts. This separation between Poprishchin’s feelings and his outward speech is another sign of his isolation: he seems unable to express what he feels and hides his true thoughts from others.



After Sophie leaves, Poprishchin reverts back to his normal behavior. He is angered by his coworkers, whom he believes are disrespectful, and seems frustrated that people he considers to be his inferiors ignore his noble status.



NOVEMBER 6

Poprishchin begins this diary entry by illustrating his anger with his manager, the section chief. The section chief had commented on Poprishchin's career, saying he should "think a little" since he is getting older and it is time that Poprishchin "got smart." The section chief teases him for having an unrealistic crush on the director's daughter and points out that Poprishchin is making very little money and can't save any of it.

Yet again, Poprishchin uses his diary to vent his frustration about his coworkers. The section chief comments that a man of Poprishchin's age should be smarter about his money and more aware of his actual financial situation. These comments provide new perspective on Poprishchin's character and expose the unearned self-importance that comprises Poprishchin's view of himself.



Poprishchin, instead of taking this commentary on his career prospects seriously, believes the section chief is jealous. Poprishchin begins to make fun of the section chief's physical attributes, and claims that in comparison, he has "signs of benevolence" that have been "bestowed" on him. Poprishchin then reemphasizes that he is a nobleman and can get a better reputation.

Poprishchin's responds to the section chief's criticism in his diary by making fun of his boss's looks. Poprishchin also compares the section chief's social reputation to his own. Poprishchin's fixation on social class prevents him from taking his boss's critique seriously; instead of realizing that his inability to save money is a problem, he merely makes fun of his superior.



NOVEMBER 8

Poprishchin describes a trip he takes to the theater. The play he sees makes fun of many different types of workers, such as lawyers and journalists. Poprishchin highlights a line where the playwright writes that merchants' sons try to "worm" their way into the noble class.

Poprishchin writes a diary entry describing a play he attends. He focuses on how the playwright describes different occupations, such as merchants and lawyers. Even when he is attending something for leisure, Poprishchin is fixated on social commentary and class.



Poprishchin admits that he loves the theater, and as soon as he gets money from his work, he goes off to see a play. He thinks his "fellow clerks" are "pigs," since they will not go to the theater unless they are given a "free ticket."

Poprishchin sees an appreciation for theater as a signifier of status and disparages his fellow clerks for not attending unless they are given a free ticket. Poprishchin then reveals that he spends much of his money on the theater even though it is above his means. Poprishchin seems willing to sacrifice his financial stability for recreational activities that are indicative of wealth.



NOVEMBER 9

Poprishchin describes an uneventful day. He goes to the office at eight, and comments on how the section chief does not greet him or notice his "arrival." He leaves the office at four and spends the rest of the evening in bed.

Even when Poprishchin is experiencing a mundane day, he writes about it in his diary. Poprishchin also takes the time to write down his complaints about his section chief, even when they are minor. Writing seems to be the only outlet for Poprishchin's life, and the only way he is able to express his many grievances.



NOVEMBER 11

Poprishchin describes sitting in his director's study and sharpening pens. He soon switches his focus to the behavior of the director, and he wonders what is going on in the director's head. Poprishchin laments not having the chance to get a "closer look" at these gentlemen's lives, and wishes he knew what they do "in their circle."

Poprishchin confesses that he has tried "several times" to start a conversation with the director, but that his "tongue" would not "obey" him. He then admits to wishing he could see into the drawing room, where there are "rich furnishings," and then fantasizes about seeing Sophie's bedroom, with all her accessories and clothing.

Poprishchin then remembers the conversation he heard between the two dogs a few weeks earlier and decides to retrieve the letter from the dogs. He recalls how he once called Medji over to him, and asked her to tell him about her owner, Sophie; Medji had not responded. He then resolves to find the other dog, Fidèle, and question her instead.

NOVEMBER 12

Poprishchin walks to the building where he saw Fidèle's owner, and comments on the smell of cabbage, which comes "pouring" out of the nearby shops. He rings the doorbell at Fidèle's owner's apartment and asks for "a word" with the dog.

Poprishchin sees Fidèle's basket in the corner and pulls out a "bundle" of papers. Poprishchin then rushes out of the house, and comments to himself that the maidservant who let him into Fidèle's house must think he's a "madman."

Poprishchin writes in his diary about the director once again, this time trying to imagine what his superior must be thinking. Poprishchin then reveals his eagerness to learn the ways of high-class men. Poprishchin's fixation on social status is equally on display when he is interacting with superiors and inferiors.



Poprishchin's social interactions show a clear split between his innermost thoughts—which are verbose—and his outward speech, which is shy and brief. He seems aware of this discrepancy and admits that there were many times that he meant to say something, but could not. Only through writing, then, is Poprishchin able to live out his fantasies of conversing with his superiors.



Poprishchin fully believes his own fantasies about the existence of talking dogs, a sign that his insanity has progressed. In fact, his diary entry reveals that he has already interrogated one of the dogs for information about Sophie, a completely illogical action. As Poprishchin's madness deepens, he resolves to talk to the other dog, Fidèle.



Poprishchin once again takes the time to render judgment on strangers, pointing out the terrible smell of cooking cabbage. This again reflects his inflated—frankly delusional—sense of self-importance.



In an ironic twist, Poprishchin points out how his behavior must make him look insane, not realizing the accuracy of the statement. Poprishchin, unaware that he is actually showing signs of madness, truly believes he has stolen the secret letter of a talking dog.



NOVEMBER 13

Poprishchin begins to read the dogs' letter but is initially fed up by the "nonsense" of the subject matter, which includes the type of food Medji likes best. When Medji begins to talk about Papá, the director and Poprishchin's boss, Poprishchin finally hopes to hear about the dogs' "political views."

The letter, a part of Poprishchin's ongoing delusion, is written convincingly: it describes topics a dog would presumably be interested in, such as food. As a form of escapist writing, the letter provides an additional outlet for Poprishchin's thoughts. Unlike in his diary entries, where he fantasizes about his noble reputation, the letter allows him to finally visualize what life is like in a rich household (even if he is fantasizing about this from the perspective of a dog).



Medji's letter begins to describe the director, pointing out that he is mostly "silent." Medji then describes a scenario one morning where uniformed men keep appearing at his house and congratulating him. That same morning, the director holds Medji up to look at a "little ribbon" on his neck. Poprishchin, reading this, comments that the director is "ambitious."

The letter mainly references personality traits that Poprishchin has already highlighted, such as the director's silent demeanor. The letter, a creative outlet for Poprishchin's mania, only repeats the conclusions he has written in his diary.



Medji begins to talk about Sophie and describes a scene in which a man named Teplov shows up at Sophie's home. Sophie calls for him to be let in, and rapturously describes Teplov to Medji, complimenting his hair and eyes. Teplov, Medji writes, is a kammerjunker, or a low-level nobleman. Medji cannot understand why Sophie would "admire him so."

The letter, which continues to be an outlet for Poprishchin's fantasies, begins to shift focus to his other fixations. The letter reveals that Sophie has been meeting with a man named Teplov, who is a minor nobleman. Sophie seems to be enamored of Teplov, though Medji cannot see his allure. This, of course, is a projection of Poprishchin's own insecurity; so intense is his mania becoming that he attempts to belittle in his fantasies a man it's not even clear actually exists.



Medji then jokes that if Sophie likes Teplov, she might soon like the clerk who sits in the director's study. Medji makes fun of the clerk's appearance and adds that Sophie always laughs when she "looks at him." Poprishchin begins to realize that Medji is talking about him, and ascribes the writing to the section chief, claiming that he wants to "injure" Poprishchin.

Poprishchin, angered by the direction the letter has taken, then blames the section chief for writing it, illustrating his paranoia. Since the letter is really a manifestation of Poprishchin's own madness, the fact that it includes a jab at his appearance implies his own deep insecurity.



Medji goes on to write that Sophie loves Teplov "to distraction," which makes her father, the director, very "happy." Medji comments that the director would like Sophie to marry someone of rank, such as a general, or colonel. Poprishchin, reading this, is enraged, and laments that higher-class men take "all that's best" in the world. Poprishchin tears the letter "to shreds."

Poprishchin continues to read the letter despite his anger. The letter finally reveals that Sophie is in love with Teplov, which is an advantageous match for her father, the director. Poprishchin's mania about status is so thorough that it even permeates his delusions about the dog-written letter.



DECEMBER 3

Poprishchin does not want to believe that Sophie will marry Teplov. He begins to rant about how Teplov cannot be that much better than anyone else. He tries to figure out if there are really “all these differences” between him and higher-class men. Poprishchin then wonders if he is actually “some sort of count,” and only seems to be a low-class “councillor.”

Poprishchin then discusses how there are “so many examples” of men suddenly realizing that they are noble or high-class. He daydreams about wearing a general’s uniform, and wonders what the director would think. He asks himself why he cannot be “promoted this minute” to a higher rank and wonders anew “what makes him” a “councillor.”

The letter frustrates Poprishchin and confirms his fears about higher class men operating in their own special circles. Again, though, the letter is really an expression of Poprishchin’s own insecurities, and as such it’s no wonder that it seems to confirm them. Nevertheless, he is so distraught that his mental instability deepens, and he begins to fantasize about his mistaken identity.



Although the scenario Poprishchin dreams about is highly unrealistic, he begins to justify it mentally. Poprishchin believes there are multiple examples of men realizing they are secretly noble, much like he believed there were many examples of talking animals. Poprishchin employs this line of thinking frequently, to rationalize his delusions.



DECEMBER 5

Poprishchin spends the morning reading the newspaper and writes in his diary how there are “strange doings” in Spain. He emphasizes how the Spanish throne has been left “vacant.” According to the article, a queen is meant to ascend the throne, but Poprishchin thinks this is impossible, as a state “cannot be without a king.”

After finding and finishing the letter, Poprishchin lets his mania find a new object on which to fixate: the mystery of Spain’s missing king. He is fascinated by Spain’s inability to locate an heir and believes that a country cannot exist with a king?it is contrary to what the status-obsessed Poprishchin believes is the natural, social order.



THE YEAR 2000, 43RD OF APRIL

Poprishchin writes in his diary that Spain has found a king, and that he is “that king.” He cannot believe he once thought he was merely a councillor. He is glad that he realized his mistaken identity, and that no one thought to put him in an “insane asylum.” He announces to his cleaning woman that he is the king and writes how she almost “died” of “fright” hearing this. Poprishchin assures her that he is not like other Spanish kings, such as Philip II.

The dates of the diary entries begin to reflect Poprishchin’s detachment from reality as his fascination with Spain’s king eventually overtakes any semblance of sanity: he begins to believe that he is Spain’s missing king. As Poprishchin has led an isolated life, he announces this grand revelation to the only person with whom he has regular contact outside of work: his cleaning woman. This adds a moment of dark comedy to the scene as it underscores how far from royalty this man actually is.



THE 86TH OF MARTOBER. BETWEEN DAY AND NIGHT.

Poprishchin's manager tells him to go to the office, as he has not been to work for three weeks. Poprishchin goes and refuses to apologize to the section chief for his truancy. His coworkers place papers in front of him, but he refuses to return to his work, and merely sits, waiting for the director to arrive.

Poprishchin's coworkers button up their coats and become more formal as the director approaches, but Poprishchin refuses to react. He thinks he should not "stand up before" the director, because he's merely a "doornail." Some of his coworkers hand him a paper to be signed, but instead of signing his name, he writes **Ferdinand VIII** to emphasize his royal status.

Poprishchin then walks out of the office and goes to the director's apartment. He goes into Sophie's boudoir, and she is startled to see him; she begins to back away from him. Poprishchin does not announce himself as **Ferdinand VIII** but says that they will finally be together. He then walks out, thinking about how women are "perfidious," and that they are in "love" with the "devil."

Poprishchin then thinks to himself that all women want to marry the "devil." He condemns all women's fathers, who wish to get "into court," and calls the women's families "ambitious Judases," as he believes they will sell their daughters for money. Suddenly, Poprishchin claims that all this family greed and ambition is the work of a "barber" who is working with a midwife to spread "Mohammedanism" in the world.

Again, the diary entry's date underscores how far removed from reality Poprishchin has become; Martober is of course a nonexistent month. Poprishchin's insanity has kept him from conducting his normal routine. When he finally arrives at the office, he refuses to apologize for his absence. Fully convinced of his royal status, he is unwilling to do the work he was assigned. His mania only serves to further isolate him from everyone around him.



Poprishchin's coworkers, wary of their superior's authority, begin to act more formal when he arrives. Poprishchin, however, believes the director is now his inferior. This is, of course, the ultimate reversal for a man who it's clear feels deeply inferior to the director. Poprishchin's deluded belief in his own nobility is so thorough that even his job cannot shake him from his delusion. Writing, here represented by his signature, once again becomes the outlet through which Poprishchin's confirms expresses his inner world.



Poprishchin, finally confident in his own status because he believes he is a king, declares his intentions to Sophie for the first time. Poprishchin's delusion of nobility finally gives him the courage to share the thoughts he has hidden away in his diary. Only within his mania can he actually find the courage to say what he really thinks. Of course, doing so in this state does nothing but frighten Sophie.



Poprishchin's insanity turns his devotion towards Sophie into mania and paranoia. He begins to rant about families who marry their daughters off to wealthy men?like the director plans to do to Sophie?and claims they are ambitious liars. Poprishchin then begins to come up with conspiracy theories, illustrating a new level to his madness.



DATE NONE. THE DAY HAD NO DATE.

Poprishchin writes in his diary that he was walking “incognito” through the neighborhood, and did not tell anyone he was **Ferdinand VIII**, the king of Spain. He claims he does not want to reveal himself without first being presented at court.

The new diary entry date reflects Poprishchin's increasing isolation and detachment from the real world. Alienated from anyone who might try to point out the inaccuracy of his delusions, he now wanders through town. He is still convinced he is the long-lost king of Spain, but refuses to tell anyone, as he wants to follow the proper customs—an absurd thought that suggests the absurdity of such social customs in the first place.



Poprishchin laments how he does not have proper **royal attire**. He wishes he could get a mantle from the tailors, but then decides he will make a new mantle himself. He locks the door so that no one can see him. He cuts up his uniform with scissors, so that he can make a new “style.”

Although Poprishchin is suffering from insanity, he is still attuned to social conventions. He believes, even in his delusional state, that a king must have proper royal attire befitting his nobility. His paranoia is so complete, however, that he hides himself away so that no one will watch him make his robes.



DON'T REMEMBER THE DATE. THERE WAS NO MONTH, EITHER. DEVIL KNOWS WHAT THERE WAS.

Poprishchin writes that he has finished his **royal clothing**. He shows it to his cleaning woman, who “cries out” when he puts it on. He still refuses to present himself “at court” as Spain has not yet sent deputies to see him, thinking it would not be proper.

Poprishchin is entirely divorced from time; there is “no month” at all any more. Fully in the depths of his delusions, Poprishchin finishes his royal attire. When he shows it to his cleaning woman—an emissary from the real world—the sight understandably distresses her. Despite being properly attired—a fact that Poprishchin cares deeply about, as he is still obsessed with social class—he refuses to go public with his noble alter ego. Instead, he prefers to be retrieved by deputies, which would befit his royal status.



THE 1ST

Poprishchin writes in his diary that he is “astonished” by the slowness of the Spanish deputies, who have yet to visit him. He visits the post office to ask if the deputies have arrived but is told that there are “no Spanish deputies here.”

Poprishchin assigns a seemingly arbitrary date to this entry; then again, it's arguable that all dates are somewhat arbitrary to begin with and meaningful only to those who believe in them. Poprishchin loses patience with the social customs he is trying to uphold. His alienation from society keeps him separate from other people, however, so his delusions continue unchecked.



MADRID. THIRTIETH FEBRUARIUS

Poprishchin writes that he is finally in Spain. He claims Spanish deputies came for him, and that they all arrived at the Spanish border in “half an hour.” When he arrived, he saw many people “with shaved heads,” and believed they were “soldiers.” A man Poprishchin calls the “lord chancellor” grabs Poprishchin and threatens to beat him if he wishes to call himself “**King Ferdinand**.” The man hits Poprishchin with a stick, but Poprishchin merely believes this to be a part of the “knightly custom.”

The faux-formal addendum to “February” is befitting of Poprishchin’s belief that this is an epic and historic day. Poprishchin claims he has arrived in Spain. The details in his diary reveal, though, that Poprishchin has been taken to an asylum. Poprishchin interprets these details through the lens of his delusion, believing the inmates with shaved heads are soldiers and not other patients. One of the asylum’s staff beats him for using the name of his made-up alter ego. This scene thus also highlights the cruelty of the asylum towards the mentally ill, as Poprishchin’s delusion isn’t actually hurting anyone other than himself.



After the man leaves, Poprishchin occupies himself with “state affairs.” He discovers that China and Spain are “the same land.” He then writes about an event that is scheduled to take place the next day, where the earth will sit “on the moon.” He runs into another room to tell other people about this plot, but the “lord chancellor” rushes in and beats him with a stick.

After Poprishchin is left alone, his insanity continues to worsen. He begins to believe that the end of the world is imminent, and that the earth and the moon will collide. Fearing for the planet, he runs to tell the other inmates, but is caught by a staff member of the asylum and beaten for voicing his delusions. Again, the asylum is a cruel place. This engender some sympathy for Poprishchin.



JANUARY OF THE SAME YEAR, WHICH CAME AFTER FEBRUARY.

Poprishchin writes that he cannot understand the customs of Spain. He writes that someone shaved his head, and that other people drip “cold water” on him. He wonders whether he has fallen into the hands of the “Inquisition.” He believes the lord chancellor might be the “grand inquisitor himself.” He then claims this is all a plot of “Polignac” a French politician.

Poprishchin recounts various scenes of abuse and torture as his alienation and insanity worsens. He believes the Inquisition is persecuting him, despite the fact that the Inquisition was a part of Spain’s history during the 1400s. Throughout the story Poprishchin’s madness has isolated him from the rest of the world; here, ironically, it offers a semblance of escape from the immense cruelty that has befallen him, as he attributes it not to meaningless torture but rather further evidence that his is really the king of Spain.



THE 25TH.

Poprishchin describes how the grand inquisitor visited him. Poprishchin hid “under a chair,” and his visitor calls him by multiple names including **King Ferdinand**, to get him to come out. Eventually, the inquisitor finds him, and chases him with a stick.

The “grand inquisitor,” who is really a staff member at the asylum, is aware of Poprishchin’s specific delusions and taunts him. He calls Poprishchin by the name of his made-up alter ego in an attempt to goad him, and then beats Poprishchin. Poprishchin, whose alienation from society is already complete, seems to be singled out especially for poor treatment.



THE OF 34 FEBRUARY TH, YREA 349.

Poprishchin writes in despair that he “does not have the strength” to “endure.” He writes how people still pour water on his head and wonders why they “torment” him. He asks to be saved and wishes to be carried “out of this world,” as he cannot withstand their torture.

He continues to call out for help, Poprishchin imagines that he sees some “Russian huts.” He wonders if that is his mother he sees “sitting at the window.” He asks his imagined mother to “save” her son and cries out that there is no “place” for him in the world. Then, suddenly, he switches topics and writes about how the Dey of Algiers, a royal figure in the Ottoman Empire, has a “bump” under his nose.

Poprishchin's isolation from the world, combined with his poor treatment, eventually breaks his spirit. He calls out for help, not understanding why he is being treated cruelly. This is the first time in the story when Poprishchin seems aware of his unfortunate circumstances, and cognizant of how he has become truly separated from the world.



Poprishchin's isolation has allowed him to achieve some self-realization in spite of his madness: he understands that he is completely alone. In his despair, he hallucinates a vision of his mother, and calls out for help. Poprishchin's awareness does not last for long, however, and he soon begins to talk of new paranoid schemes. Poprishchin's insanity returns in full force, and his moment of self-realization ends.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Harman, Emma. "The Diary of a Madman." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 16 Feb 2019. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Harman, Emma. "The Diary of a Madman." LitCharts LLC, February 16, 2019. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-diary-of-a-madman>.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Diary of a Madman* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Gogol, Nikolai. *The Diary of a Madman*. Vintage. 1999.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Gogol, Nikolai. *The Diary of a Madman*. New York: Vintage. 1999.