

Dead Souls

N. Gogol

Discussion Questions for 2-23-19

1. The author called Dead Souls a prose poem. It has also been called a picaresque novel, a minor epic, and a satire. Which genre do you think best describes it? What did you think of the inverted structure: that is, beginning in medias res, and ending with the hero's origins? And what of the tangential narration?
2. What kind of hero is Chichikov? Can he even be called one? What does he value? What are his life goals?
3. Does the character of the narrator seem intrusive? Is he effective in giving a realistic view of Chichikov? Is he unbiased? Is his secondary purpose as an apologist for the nobility? For Russian culture?
4. Gogol frequently makes detailed lists about inanimate objects. What may be the purpose of such attention to superfluous descriptions? Why do you think they are given more emphasis than the plot?
5. What impressions of Russian life do you as the reader get from Dead Souls? Positive or negative?
6. Describe a passage that you found to be thematically rich and relate it to the work's title.
7. What is your understanding of serfdom in Russia when Gogol wrote the book? How does the author portray serfdom? Are there any good landlords in the book? Why do you think they act so greedy when Chichikov bargains with them?
8. Besides serfdom, what else is Gogol criticizing in the novel? Nabokov talks about the Russian word "poshlust" as the book's theme. It is generally translated as "pretentious, banal, fake". Discuss how this concept applies to Chichikov and the other characters. What are some examples of poshlust as defined by Nabokov, "That the acme of human happiness is purchaseable and that its purchase somehow ennobles the purchaser"?
9. Could Part 1 have stood alone as a complete work? Why is the narrator largely absent from Part 2?
10. The story has a circular structure. Gogol reportedly was emulating Homer and Dante. Do you see any similarities? Are you reminded of any other book?
11. Why do you think gossip is central to the climax of the story? (End of Part I). One translator (Pevear) noted that the characters "have no psychology....Their lack of inner life gives Gogol's characters an almost mythic dimension. They lose their sharply negative features of...vice...and instead become wildly funny." Did you find this to be true?
12. A Russian reviewer (1909) described the book as "a plunge into bottomless physicality". What examples come to mind?

"Only Pushkin senses my essence.....and my unique ability to present vividly the (poshlust) of life....with such force that the little details burst forth. That is my main quality". Nikolai Gogol