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## THE IMAGE OF THE “LITTLE MAN” FROM GOGOL TO MODERN RUSSIAN LITERATURE

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### Abstract

The article examines the development of the image of the “little man” in Russian literature—from the classical works of the 19th century to the texts of contemporary authors. Special attention is given to how the interpretation of this type of character changes depending on the historical and cultural context. It is shown that, while preserving its key features, this image acquires new semantic nuances.

**Keywords:** Little man, Russian literature, Gogol, Dostoevsky, contemporary prose, personality, society.

### Introduction

The image of the “little man” occupies a special place in the Russian literary tradition. As a rule, this refers to a character deprived of social significance, yet endowed with a rich inner life, which often proves to be deeper than that of “important” figures.

This type first received a vivid artistic embodiment in the works of Nikolai Gogol and was later developed in the writings of Fyodor Dostoevsky and other authors

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of the 19th century<sup>1</sup>. However, in the 21st century, the “little man” does not disappear—on the contrary, he continues to transform, reflecting new forms of pressure on the individual.

### 1. The “Little Man” in 19th-Century Literature.

When speaking of the “little man,” it is impossible not to turn to the short story “The Overcoat”, which presents one of the most famous characters in Russian literature—Akaky Akakievich Bashmachkin. His image is built on extreme modesty, almost complete social invisibility, and a deep dependence on external circumstances.

The tragedy of the hero lies not only in poverty, but also in the lack of any opportunity to be heard. He exists as if on the margins of the world, where his fate does not truly concern anyone.

Scholars rightly note that it was Gogol who first portrayed a person as a victim of an impersonal bureaucratic system<sup>2</sup>.

In Fyodor Dostoevsky, this image acquires a new development. In the novel *Poor Folk*, the focus shifts from the external position of the hero to his inner world. Makar Devushkin is no longer just a humiliated clerk — he is a person who acutely experiences his own dignity and strives for recognition. Thus, the “little man” begins to be understood as a personality.

### 2. The Evolution of the Image in the 20th Century

In the 20th century, the image of the “little man” does not disappear, but becomes noticeably more complex. In Soviet literature, he is often incorporated into a system of collective values, where individuality recedes into the background.

<sup>1</sup> Гоголь Н. В. *Шинель*. — М.: Художественная литература, 1984.  
Достоевский Ф. М. *Бедные люди*. — СПб.: Азбука, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Лотман Ю. М. *Структура художественного текста*. — М.: Искусство, 1970.

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However, in the second half of the century, the motif of alienation becomes increasingly palpable. The hero is no longer only socially limited — he is internally lonely. His conflict shifts into the psychological sphere.

A number of studies emphasize that during this period, the “little man” turns into a kind of symbol of the crisis of personality and the loss of stable reference points.

### 3. The “Little Man” in Contemporary Literature

In modern Russian prose, this image acquires new, sometimes unexpected features. Now the hero may appear outwardly quite successful, yet experience a deep inner dissonance.

In the works of Victor Pelevin and Guzel Yakhina, the “little man” exists in a different reality — informational, rapidly changing, and often fragmented<sup>3</sup>. The pressure of society takes on new forms, and the hero finds themselves unprepared for them.

For the modern “little man,” the following traits are characteristic:

- a sense of lost identity;
- constant столкновение with information overload;
- a feeling of alienation, intensified in the digital environment.

Thus, the hero of the 21st century is not so much socially weak as internally disoriented.

### 4. Comparative Analysis

If in Gogol’s works the “little man” is almost deprived of a voice and the ability to influence his fate, in contemporary literature he is already capable of reflection. He is aware of his position, although this awareness does not always lead to overcoming the crisis.

<sup>3</sup> Пелевин В. О. *Generation «П»*. — М.: Эксмо, 1999.  
Яхина Г. Ш. *Зулейха открывает глаза*. — М.: АСТ, 2015.

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At the same time, a key feature remains — vulnerability in the face of the system, albeit a transformed one.

Several directions in the evolution of this image can be identified:

- a shift from predominantly social issues to psychological ones;
- an intensification of internal conflict;
- a change in the nature of pressure (from bureaucratic to informational and cultural).

The image of the “little man” remains relevant throughout the history of Russian literature. Epochs, social conditions, and forms of pressure change; however, the core problem — the vulnerability of the individual in the face of the world — does not lose its significance.

From Gogol’s silent clerk to the reflective hero of modern prose, this path reflects not only a literary evolution but also changes in the understanding of the human being as such.

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