

In Alexander Pushkin's "The Queen Of Spades," published in 1833, the theme of power is explored in many ways. Pushkin treats the theme of power as a precursor to madness, loss of dignity, and loss of compassion for others. Though power is often exposed as a source of these conflicts, Pushkin's methods of shedding light on the stealthy growth of a thirst for power is quite enlightening.

An element in "The Queen of Spades" is the high level of secrecy and self-absorption apparent in the main character, Herman. Though he consistently watched the other men's gambling with avid and rapt attention, he never expressed his personal plans to make a fortune. Most importantly, he never let on that he was much interested in the story of Countess X told, by Narumov. Herman is only out for himself, and his complete self-absorption and secrecy, which he believes to be merely extremely focused and diligent ambition, leads to a lack of understanding for other people. This lack of real communication and empathy between others is one of the factors that leads to his demise because it prevents him from getting the secret from Countess X in a persuasive, successful fashion.

Herman's thirst for power (which, to him, means infinite material fortune) produces a self-absorption and superiority complex that leads to his failure in persuading Countess X to reveal the secret three cards to him. All the tactics Herman uses to convince Countess X are each equally base, extreme and assume that Countess X, a woman with great knowledge is stupid, and meek. In what is both a contradictory and patronizing speech Herman says to Countess X: "Perhaps some horrible sin is involved that makes all hope of eternal bliss impossible, a devil's pact... Think, you are old; you don't have long to live-I am ready to take your sin on my head. Only reveal your secret to me. Remember, the happiness of a human being is in your hands, and not only I, but my children, my grandchildren, and great-grandchildren will bless your memory

and honor it as holy...” Firstly, Herman makes an insincere assumption that a woman who has such an immense knowledge and power and used it for her own and a family member’s benefit (albeit lightly) would view her knowledge as a sin. Secondly, Herman is contradictory when he states that generations of his children will worship her, because, if the Countess truly wanted to atone for her sin, having her worshipped would sure negate that atonement. His failure in each attempt to understand the Countess’s character and simply throwing himself at her and resorting to violence causes her to literally die of shock, thus barring Herman’s knowledge of the secret for power.

Herman’s thirst for power also leads to a loss of his identity. The power overtakes and absorbs him so much that the three cards are literally the only things he can think about, and of course, his mistaken card that cost him his sanity. He imagines everything to be a form of one of three cards. Beyond losing his identity and sanity in his quest for power, Herman’s mistakenly tries to cheat destiny. He does not follow the Countess’s very clear orders and though a superstitious person by nature, his egoism fueled by a satiation of power prohibits him from following the course of destiny the Countess gave to him in his dream. Thus, power causes one to feel invincible and to therefore cheat destiny, as it were. Lastly, an important consequence of Herman’s need for power shows itself in Herman’s blindness to love. He is incapable of loving another because the only thing that can absorb his attention is power. Though Lizaveta’s love was no longer as pure when she discovered his true intentions, Herman could have managed to marry her and mend their relationship had he followed the Countess’s strong advice and not given complete vent to a thirst for power.

In Alexander Pushkin’s 1833 tale, “A Bronze Horseman,” the type of the “small man” is explored. The small man has many characteristics. His defining characteristic is his normalcy.

That is, he is common, unoriginal, and there are hordes of masses of people just like him. In Pushkin's tale, the small man is Evgeny. He has normal ambitions of becoming rich, but lacks the egoism, greediness, ambition and power not common to most in order to accomplish his dreams. More importantly, he is simply not in a class able to do so, and there is little to no flexibility within classes during his time. Like a normal, "small" man, he has his realistic dreams: getting a decent job and marrying his sweetheart. Evgeny is stuck with the struggles of everyday life just like every other lower-class person: not having enough money, being unprepared for rotten weather ahead. These "small man" characteristics are apparent in the following passage: "Evgeny came home and, shaking his greatcoat, got undressed for bed-but lay long hours awake, his head with various thoughts disturbed and aching... The fact that he was penniless; that packed mountains of work must be surmounted to earn him freedom, fame, and ease; that wit and money might be counted to him from God; and that one sees fellows on permanent vacation, dull-witted, idle, in whose station life runs as smooth as in a dream... he wished the raindrops with less raging madness would lash the glass, that the wind swished less drearily..." Thus, Evgeny is illustrated as having normal fears, jealousy of people with more money and ease in their life, dreams of becoming rich, and is emotionally affected by the weather just like everyone else.

The point of this very clear small man description of Evgeny can perhaps be seen as a means of a strict counterpoint against the complete opposite personality of Peter the Great. Peter the Great is a "big man." He in many ways, literally created Petersburg, but yet has no idea of the thousands of thoughts that run through the common small men who make up his city. Thus, when the Neva overflows, Peter the Great cannot understand or deems it beneath him, the consequences of this disaster upon the thousands of poor, nameless "small man" inhabitants.

Pushkin illustrates the stark difference between everyday small men like Evgeny and the societal power they are essentially helpless in the hands of; in this case, the figure of Peter the Great, who represents not only the Tsar, but Petersburg itself and thus bears the responsibility of the disasters that plague her, albeit natural disasters or not. The helplessness of a man in Evgeny's position causes small men to lose everything in the face of a natural disaster, and though perhaps exaggerated in the story, truly lose their mind and sense of self, because they are only the products of Peter the Great's idealized utopian city, and thus completely vulnerable to its calamities.

In Nikolai Gogol's 1842 "The Overcoat," the protagonist Akaky Akakievich is a meek, weak, submissive, unambitious and passive man. He is thus often the butt of many jokes, insults and overall doormat for all mean-spirited (who artfully are identified as normal, everyday insensitive people) to get their kicks from. In this way, F. Yarusova's illustration of Akaky Akakievich is quite accurate. Akaky is portrayed as a small, ugly, meek, almost naïve-like man who is at the mercy of some higher force. In the story, this force is essentially the selfish materialism flooding civilization and extinguishing the generous fraternity feelings inherent in Russian Orthodoxy. Akaky seems to be begging for something in the illustration; literally this could be his overcoat. Metaphorically, he wants acceptance by his peers. Though he never realized it before, Akaky begins to really enjoy outfitting his overcoat with the finest materials he can afford. Though on the inside, he is the same prone-to-insults, meek, boring Akaky, his coworkers (thus society as a whole) embrace him, albeit insincerely, in a brotherly manner simply because he has made an effort to conform more to them.

Yarusov appears to want to convey a sense of isolation, confusion and helplessness in Akaky. Since we are unable to see who precisely he is addressing, we are given the sense that

Akaky himself doesn't even know what he wants and who he's addressing; to him, he just wants his overcoat, but he is unaware of the true meaning behind the overcoat. It is a clutch, a remedy to the worthless, independent and isolated life he leads. Rather than filling this hole with Gogol's vision of Christian brotherly love, Akaky who lacks the strength and awareness to do so, submits to the tempting materialism world in which all his coworkers have long sunk. We are given the impression that Akaky's coworkers care as much about each other as they do Akaky at heart; however, their exterior treatment must, to preserve their so-called honor, work in accordance to the materialistic demands of their society. Thus, Yarusov's illustration indicates a domineering, literally black (thus evil) presence that Akaky submits to and longs to revel in. Though he does not necessarily know exactly what he is so longing for, he has experienced the acceptance by his colleagues and sense of worth it gives himself to own a nice overcoat.

The character appears to either be, or is wearing, a rather fancy dress with many frills. Thus, the character may represent materialism in a more literal sense, almost taken straight from the scene in which Akaky ogles and becomes excited over the many options available to him to inlay his overcoat, etc. In short, the illustration portrays Akaky's blind, hopeful submission to materialism as a substitute for religious fraternal love already so starved in his society. The dark colors and overall dark mood and tone of the picture illustrates the error in this way of thinking, as does of course, the story, seeing that Akaky loses his mind over the overcoat, and actually dies due to its theft.