

## *Eugene Onegin* and Russian Identity

Luis Murillo

Alexander Pushkin's book, *Eugene Onegin*, conveys a variety of different aspects of pre-reform Russian society. Through Pushkin's clever usage of characters, he highlights the influence of foreign works, provides a critique of privileged order, and illustrates the then current Russian identity crisis which he foretells will end in misery if left unresolved. Embodied in the different characters of the book, Pushkin highlights this crisis and the debates over the future of European ideas in Russia. One of the major themes of the book is the influence of Europe on Russia. This can be seen throughout the book in two different ways. The first can be seen through Pushkin's repeated mention and inclusion of different foreign writers and philosophers. Undoubtedly, Pushkin's addition and mention of works from European writers and philosophers signifies his familiarity with them and their influence on himself and the educated nobility.

The second and more common way the novel depicts the influence of foreign works is through the different characters of the story. For Onegin, this can be seen very early on in the story where it mentions his getting ready routine where he dresses like "a London dandy."<sup>1</sup> This is further emphasized later in the chapter where it mentions Onegin leaving the ball for a change of clothes and how foreign exports are a desired commodity.<sup>2</sup> Continuing on this theme, Pushkin underscores how nearly all characters in the book have been influenced by philosophers like Rousseau and Kant. This is significant as it depicts the influence of the enlightenment on imperial Russian society or more specifically, the educated nobility. Perhaps the two characters that articulate this point the most are Lensky and Tatiana. Noted by Pushkin to be a "devotee of Kant,"

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<sup>1</sup> Aleksandr Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*, trans. Stanley Mitchell (Penguin Classics, 2008), 8.

<sup>2</sup> Pushkin, 16.

the German Lensky is a direct contrast to Onegin's more grim and nihilistic character.<sup>3</sup> Lensky's foreign background and education serve to highlight the role of Europe and the potential outcomes that could come from it. His more emotional youthful optimism and fixation on the pursuit of love is also in many ways similar to that of Tatiana.

Tatiana's character and her differentness are emphasized in her upbringing as Pushkin mentions that more traditional items like dolls "were boring to her equally."<sup>4</sup> Most influential to her worldviews are the English and French romance novels that shape her love stricken character. Throughout the novel, Tatiana's infatuation with Onegin and hopeless romanticism are a reflection of the impact of the foreign romance novels. Her foreign views of love, romance, and idealistic views of marriage are starkly contrasted by Pushkin's constant insertion of reminders that these are not traditionally Russian. This is exemplified in chapter 3 when Tatiana asks her nurse what love is like. The nurse's story of her arranged marriage at the age of thirteen and how she "wept for fear" serve to contrast what is traditional to Russia and what foreign books have made Tatiana hopeful for.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, the neighbor's gossip and constant insistence that she is at a marriageable age further emphasize this point.

Tatiana's character not only shows the heavy influence of foreign works, it also highlights the identity crisis that affected nobles in imperial society. As Tatiana's character changes over time, the contrast between what is traditional or expected and what Tatiana wants is stretched. After Lensky dies in the duel and Onegin leaves, Tatiana is stuck between societal expectations and her idealized version of marriage influenced by foreign writers. This dissonance is manifested in chapter five in the form of a nightmare where monsters kidnap Tatiana and go on to argue over

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<sup>3</sup> Pushkin, *Onegin*, 36.

<sup>4</sup> Pushkin, 47.

<sup>5</sup> Pushkin, 62.

who she belongs to before Onegin claims her as his own, her fears are relieved, and she prophesies the death of Lensky.<sup>6</sup> This nightmare is symbolic not only of her hopes to marry Onegin, but of the terrors that she expects an arranged marriage to be if Onegin does not marry her. In this dream, the animals declaring that Tatiana is theirs symbolize the enthusiastic marriage candidates that want to take her against her will, but that Tatiana can only help but view as monsters to be afraid of.

Through this perspective, the book also gives us a glimpse into the gender roles during this period. When discussing the marriage of Tatiana and Olga's mother, Pushkin notes that much like all the other character in the story who have arranged marriages, she was filled with "dreadful sorrow" at least until she became accustomed to her new life and her role become a habit, which Pushkin notes as "a substitute for happiness."<sup>7</sup> Through the marriages of Tatiana, her maid, and her mother, the story expresses a common theme. That is a degree of discontentedness with the traditional or habitual, but that it is something that becomes habit over time. Their marriages are not of romance or love, but rather of duty and custom.

After Tatiana gets married and Onegin writes his love letter to her, she expresses her discontent with the situation and how she can't hide that she loves Onegin. While Tatiana does not hide the fact that she wishes nothing more than to return to her old life, she conveys the harsh reality of her situation: she must now conform to traditional expectations. In this sense, Tatiana's struggle is indicative of Russian society as it questions the extent of to what degree foreign ideals should be followed or abandoned in favor of Russian culture. The unhappy and bitter ending to the story is Pushkin's critique of this identity crisis as he pictures an ending where no one is really content with their situation but moves along out of habit due to the lack of available alternatives.

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<sup>6</sup> Pushkin, 108.

<sup>7</sup> Pushkin, 49.

This is demonstrated in Tatiana's marriage as she chooses to follow customs rather than daring to oppose the laws of marriage, both of which were unpleasant options.

Another way that Pushkin highlights the potential consequences of this identity crisis is through the death of Lensky. Onegin's actions and overall plot in the story leave him as the same grim and pessimistic individual while his polar opposite, Lensky, the embodiment of youth, hope, optimism, and passion, lays dead and forgotten. The similarities between Lensky and Tatiana are underscored when Pushkin refers to Onegin as "the slayer of her [Tatiana] brother."<sup>8</sup> Both are depicted as diehard romantics who choose two vastly different paths that both lead to misery. For Tatiana, her conformity has left her in an unhappy situation where she can only long for the past. For Lensky, his unwillingness to let go of his ideals leads him to hopelessly believe that he "will be her [Olga] savior."<sup>9</sup> In this case, it highlights this identity crisis as it shows that regardless of the path the characters take, only sadness, death, or regret remain in their future. It is in this way that Pushkin paints a world of misery if the influenced educated nobility become stuck between following the influence of Europe and what is traditionally Russian.

Another way Tatiana's character is an embodiment of Russian society is through the issue of the Russian Language. Pushkin demonstrates this through Tatiana by stating that, while her love for winters showed she was "Russian to the core"<sup>10</sup>, she still mispronounced the "Russian N just like a French one"<sup>11</sup> and that in Russian she could "with difficulty write a word."<sup>12</sup> Tatiana's struggle with Russian and its reflection of the Russian identity crisis are also embodied by Pushkin himself when he laments that their language is "still not used in postal prose."<sup>13</sup> This is significant

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<sup>8</sup> Pushkin, 149.

<sup>9</sup> Pushkin, 128.

<sup>10</sup> Pushkin, 101

<sup>11</sup> Pushkin, 50.

<sup>12</sup> Pushkin, 66.

<sup>13</sup> Pushkin, 66.

as it is indicative of Russian society as a whole and a concern that Russian nobility learn European languages before they do Russian.

Another common theme seen in the book is a critique of privileged order. During the introduction of Onegin, Pushkin writes that after he receives his inheritance, he replaces “the old corvee with light quit-rent” blessing the serfs with less demanding labor.<sup>14</sup> The easing of labor for his serfs comes with contempt from his neighbors who see him as a dangerous individual. Onegin’s more progressive views on serfdom are a product of his enlightened beliefs. This relates to Russian society as questions over reform or the abolition of serfdom emerged as it began to be viewed as an anchor holding back progress in Russia. Ideas of the enlightenment questioned serfdom and its morality. This also demonstrates a critique of privileged order as, despite his enlightened views on serfdom, he still chooses to uphold the system rather than completely dismantling it.

Additionally, Pushkin’s critique of society can also be seen in other ways. When introducing the family of Olga and Tatiana, it is noted that when guests are invited, they follow “the customs of antiquity” which include serving them “with dishes, as their rank deserved.”<sup>15</sup> This demonstrates a more indirect critique as it shows he views the idea of ranks and nobility to be antiquated. Anti Serfdom critique is not just given through Onegin’s actions as Pushkin himself sprinkles in minor criticisms. One example of this is Tatiana’s ball in chapter five where Pushkin introduces the guests that show up. For Gvozdin, Pushkin sarcastically calls him a “splendid lord” before stating that his success stems from “peasant farmers badly off.”<sup>16</sup> This is significant as we know that Pushkin was exiled for his opinions and that art began to take the form of political and social criticism aimed at promoting general wellbeing and the advancement of society.

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<sup>14</sup> Pushkin, 35.

<sup>15</sup> Pushkin, 51.

<sup>16</sup> Pushkin, 112.

Overall, Pushkin conveys the influence of foreign writers and the enlightenment on the nobility through the book's characters. Casual mentions of enlightenment thinkers, character's book interests and the obsession with European clothing exports highlight this point. He also provides a critique of privileged order through his questioning of serfdom and nobility. Most importantly, his work illustrated the Russian identity crisis through characters like Tatiana and Lensky whose stories end with sadness because of the battle between European ideals and Russian culture. These themes shown throughout the book are significant as they convey the identity struggles that educated nobility faced during this time.