THE TRANSFORMATION OF PUSHKIN'S EUGENE ONEGIN INTO TCHAIKOVSKY'S OPERA

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A Thesis

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ABSTRACT

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Since receiving its first performance in 1879, Pyotr Il’yich Tchaikovsky’s fifth opera, *Eugene Onegin* (1877-1878), has garnered much attention from both music scholars and prominent figures in Russian literature. Despite its largely enthusiastic reception in musical circles, it almost immediately became the target of negative criticism by Russian authors who viewed the opera as a trivial and overly romanticized embarrassment to Pushkin’s novel. Criticism of the opera often revolves around the fact that the novel’s most significant feature—its self-conscious narrator—does not exist in the opera, thus completely changing one of the story’s defining attributes. Scholarship in defense of the opera began to appear in abundance during the 1990s with the work of Alexander Poznansky, Caryl Emerson, Byron Nelson, and Richard Taruskin. These authors have all sought to demonstrate that the opera stands as more than a work of overly personalized emotionalism. In my thesis I review the relationship between the novel and the opera in greater depth by explaining what distinguishes the two works from each other, but also by looking further into the argument that Tchaikovsky’s music represents the novel well by cleverly incorporating ironic elements as a means of capturing the literary narrator’s sardonic voice. An in-depth study of Pushkin’s novel and its creation is included. Through the use of translated primary sources in addition to secondary ones, I analyze in detail both Tchaikovsky’s compositional journey and the opera itself in order to discover what drove the composer to pick only seven “scenes”
from the novel and whether he viewed the opera as a genuine representation or simply an artistically liberal interpretation of Pushkin’s work. Ultimately, Pushkin’s novel and Tchaikovsky’s opera represent multifaceted and personal creations that stand as the results of unique circumstances and perspectives. Understanding the connections between the two works—and especially the translation of the novel’s most unique qualities to the opera—only becomes possible after they are studied separately and comprehensively. In my thesis I attempt to shed light on the two works independently and illuminate in detail this artistic and musical transformation.
To Emily Sarver
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INTRODUCTION

For the subject of his fifth opera, Pyotr Il’yich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893) chose as his literary source Alexander Pushkin’s famous novel in verse *Eugene Onegin* (1823-1831). In Tchaikovsky’s opera (1877-1878), Pushkin’s main characters—Onegin, Tatiana, and Lensky—eventually earn the audience’s sympathy and, in some cases, even their love and admiration. Instead of standing as objects subject to the narrator’s mercurial and often sarcastic commentary, as they do in the novel, they become multi-dimensional, highly relatable characters. Tchaikovsky, a true product of romanticism, presents them—at least in the cases of Tatiana and Lensky—with sensitivity and compassion. The opera’s complex score plays a vital role in the creation of multifaceted and thus very individual and relatable characters who appeal to the senses and emotions of the audience. In contrast to Tchaikovsky, Pushkin found just as much inspiration in skepticism and realism as he did in the romantic idealism of the mid and late nineteenth century. These fundamentally different worldviews segregate the two works, despite the fact that the opera’s libretto draws almost entirely from the text of the novel. Although it has been argued that the moody and often cruel narrator of the novel still exists in the opera’s music (despite the removal of the narrator as a character), Tchaikovsky’s work in many respects stands as a sympathetic, emotive, and highly romantic telling of Pushkin’s story. In this thesis it will be argued that the novel and the opera, although obviously intimately related, stem from separate traditions and reflect biases unique to their creators. It will also be argued that Tchaikovsky’s opera does demonstrate the composer’s awareness of Pushkin’s skepticism and irony, and in some significant instances takes up successfully, through text and music, the sardonic flavor of the novel.
Despite its positive reception in musical circles, the opera almost immediately became popular as a source of negative criticism by Russian authors, including Ivan Sergeyevich Turgenev, who viewed it as a trivial and overly romanticized embarrassment to Pushkin’s novel. The first significant English translation of the work by Walter W. Arndt appeared in 1963, and the more seminal English version of the novel by the prolific Russian author Vladimir Nabokov emerged the following year. Nabokov’s expansive commentary, which accompanies his translation, includes negative and trivializing references to the opera, thus furthering the arrows first slung by other Russian critics. Criticism of the opera often revolves around the fact that the novel’s most important character—the nameless narrator—does not exist (at least not obviously) in the opera, thus completely changing one of the story’s defining attributes. Tchaikovsky’s work has frequently been attacked for its sentimental romanticism and overly serious approach to the fate of Pushkin’s characters—characters who, in the novel, find themselves mocked, then pitied, then cruelly mocked again by the novel’s capricious narrator. When reading the novel, readers feel nervous whenever they find themselves sympathizing with a character, as they never know when the unpredictable narrator will turn on them and make the character the object of sarcastic ridicule or derision, undeserving of compassion. Pushkin’s use of a satirical narrative voice reflects the fact that he found inspiration in, and wished to in many ways emulate, Lord Byron’s 1824 novel in verse *Don Juan*. Tchaikovsky’s opera, which removes the narrator as a character, seems to present a more straightforward version of Pushkin’s tale and revolves around characters who clearly either deserve the audience’s sympathy and pity or their disdain. It must be noted, however, that characters sometimes awkwardly take on necessary parts of the narrator’s text when discussing themselves or their situations—this occurs in Madame Larina.
and Filippyevna’s duet in the opening scene, and also in scene five when Zaretski introduces himself, for example.

Scholarship in defense of the opera began to appear in abundance during the 1990s with the work of Alexander Poznansky, Caryl Emerson, Byron Nelson, and Richard Taruskin. These authors have all sought to demonstrate that the opera stands as more than a work of overly personalized emotionalism. Taruskin, in particular, has attempted to prove that Tchaikovsky actually represents the satirical depth of the novel successfully through his use of recurring melodic themes associated with ideas, feelings, and characters, and through his ironic use of certain compositional techniques (including canon in the opening scene) to fit Pushkin’s witty and often satirical text. In a more recent essay by Boris Gasparov, the controversial relationship between the novel and the opera is discussed as a means of discovering details about the different cultural surroundings and personal viewpoints and goals of the author and composer, rather than as a means for shallowly contrasting the two inevitably unique works.

In this thesis the relationship between the novel and the opera will be reviewed in greater depth by explaining what distinguishes the two works from each other, but also by looking further into the argument that Tchaikovsky’s music represents the novel well by cleverly incorporating ironic elements as a means of capturing the literary narrator’s sardonic voice. An in-depth study of Pushkin’s novel in verse will be included and will make up a significant

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1 Examples of scholarship in defense of the opera include the following:

portion of my thesis. Through the use of translated primary sources in addition to secondary ones, I will analyze both Tchaikovsky’s compositional journey and the opera itself in order to discover what drove the composer to pick only seven “scenes” from the novel and whether he viewed the opera as a genuine representation or simply an artistically liberal interpretation of Pushkin’s work. I will also shed light on why Tchaikovsky chose to present the novel’s characters the way he did, and I will discuss in detail how the complexity of Pushkin’s writing and characters translates into the opera. Ultimately, Pushkin’s novel and Tchaikovsky’s opera represent multifaceted and personal creations that stand as the results of unique circumstances and perspectives. Understanding the connections between the two works only becomes possible after they are studied separately and comprehensively, and this is precisely what I intend to accomplish in this thesis.
CHAPTER I. THE NOVEL

Introduction

According to Svetlana Evdokimova and many other scholars of Russian literature, Alexander Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* (1823-1831) “heralded the birth of a new lyrical-epic genre.”¹ Written in the style of Lord Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (1812-1818) and *Don Juan* (1818-1824), the novel’s most memorable and significant features are its cleverly crafted poetic language and “radically innovative narrative structure.”² Each of the work’s eight chapters is comprised of stanzas written in verse, immediately indicating that in composing the novel Pushkin broke typical genre boundaries. As pointed out by Richard Taruskin, the beauty of *Eugene Onegin* emerges from Pushkin’s vivid storytelling—not from the plot itself. Taruskin explains that this literary work is adored for what Nabokov called “the divine details”—the verbal dazzle (that is, the music that Pushkin had already put there), the wry social commentary, the perfectly exact descriptions, the endlessly subtle and nuanced characterizations, the interrelationship of literary and social conventions, all conveyed by a famously intrusive narrator’s voice. It is a work of narrative art that is loved for the telling, not the tale. It calls such delightful attention to itself as a work of art, and as a specifically verbal construction containing so many verbal pleasures of an absolutely unparaphrasable kind, that it is small wonder it has been declared sacrosanct by the scholars who earn their livelihoods by dissecting those aspects of it that are beyond the reach of music (or so they think).³

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¹ Svetlana Evdokimova, “Introduction,” in *Alexander Pushkin’s Little Tragedies: The Poetics of Brevity*, ed. Svetlana Evdokimova (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 10. The lyrical-epic genre presents a combination of the traditional epic and the lyric. While it still generally maintains the structure of a narrative poem, it often has an abbreviated length and includes a self-conscious narrator. *Eugene Onegin’s* lyric qualities include its often self-contained poetic stanzas, but as a lengthy narrative poem, the work also maintains qualities typically associated with the epic genre.


The presence of a self-conscious, opinionated, and temperamental narrative voice stands as the novel’s most memorable and identifiable characteristic and must be discussed in detail in order to fully understand the story, its main characters, and the novel’s transformation and translation into a different artistic medium. *Eugene Onegin*, told from the perspective of a clever but moody narrator who cannot always be distinguished from Pushkin himself, includes just as much social commentary, witty asides, and profound digressions as it does material relating directly to the lives of the main characters. Large pauses occur in the story’s linear movement in order to accommodate the narrator’s commentary, forcing readers to read pages and pages before coming to the most recent plot turn’s conclusion. Despite this, the narrator’s asides sparkle as the novel’s most memorable passages and are largely, if not entirely, responsible for the work’s permanent place in the Russian literary canon.

Truly, Pushkin’s writing in *Eugene Onegin* possesses unique characteristics. Comprised of eight chapters, the novel is written almost completely in fourteen-line stanzas made up of iambic tetrameter lines (Onegin’s and Tatiana’s letters are exceptions, as we will see). Each stanza follows an innovative meter scheme invented by Pushkin—“ababccddeffegg”—that has come to be known as the “Onegin stanza” or “Pushkin sonnet.”

Because the chapters were published individually and irregularly over a period of eight years, the complete novel comes across as somewhat fragmented and includes multiple perspectives. Additionally, Pushkin’s initial timeline potentially extended the novel to twelve chapters, not eight, thereby heightening the work’s incomplete nature. Snippets of other chapters about the character of Onegin exist, but they were not included in either the first complete, published version of 1833 or in the revised

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and standard version of 1837. Although the presence of multiple perspectives and inconsistencies in the novel can be partly attributed to its protracted genesis, it is also obvious that this quality stands as an innovative and consciously chosen literary technique. Pushkin himself said that in the work he sought to confront and expand on Byron’s *Don Juan*—while both Byron and Pushkin produced verse novels revolving around philanderer antiheroes,

Pushkin’s crucial move was to take what was a generally acknowledged weakness in Byron and turn it to his own productive advantage. In deciding to discontinue *Childe Harold*, Byron publically admitted that he had failed to draw a clear distinction between himself and his fictional protagonist. In *Evgenii Onegin*, Pushkin directly confronts this key problem of Romantic poetics, bring these two aspects of authorial self into self-conscious dialogue. Pushkin’s brilliance lies in playing them off one another, demonstrating the fundamental interdependence of art and life, “literariness” and “reality.” *Evgenii Onegin* thus marks a quantum leap in Russian literature, from the earlier century’s mistrust of “fiction” to a new conception of art. Pushkin offers a profound meditation on the way in which cultural models (especially novel) shape modern identity.⁵

While Byron’s *Childe Harold* includes autobiographical elements (where a line is drawn between Byron and his protagonist is ambiguous at best), Pushkin, as the self-conscious narrator in *Eugene Onegin*, clearly separates his voice from that of Onegin. Despite their differences, both Byron’s *Don Juan* and Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* have long been viewed as representative and paramount examples of irony. Although the story of *Eugene Onegin* is truly a charming one, then, the true key to the novel’s success and popularity lies in Pushkin’s unique literary approach and colorful language.

The Plot

Pushkin’s eight-chapter novel tells the story of Eugene Onegin, a young dandy who moves from St. Petersburg to the countryside when he inherits an estate from his uncle. The story is told by a nameless narrator who introduces Onegin as “a young scapegrace” and “a good

⁵ Levitt, “Onegin,” 42.
Chapter One includes numerous digressions in which the narrator comments on social, literary, and philosophical issues and also introduces Onegin at length. Finally, in Chapter Two, the narrator introduces the rest of the story’s main characters: first Onegin’s main foil, Vladimir Lensky, followed by Olga, Lensky’s country-girl fiancée, and her sister, Tatiana. Like Lensky, the main literary purpose for Olga’s existence is to act as a main character’s foil, and she and Tatiana are immediately presented as complementary opposites. The serial manner in which Pushkin introduces the four most important characters—with Onegin and Tatiana on the outer ends (in Chapter One and the end of Chapter Two, respectively) and Lensky and Olga side by side in the middle (both are presented in Chapter Two)—perfectly sets each individual up to be compared and contrasted to the appropriate counterpart. Additionally, by giving them the first and last significant introductions, this literary construction emphasizes to the reader the greater significance of Onegin and Tatiana.

Once in the country, Onegin and Lensky, despite their opposite personalities, become fast friends. Onegin, a bored cynic and playboy, finds an engaging counterpart in the poetic, optimistic, and thoroughly romantic Lensky. Eager to share his happiness with the world, Lensky introduces Onegin to both his fiancée, Olga Larina, and to the rest of her family. Although Onegin feels socially above Olga and her country-dwelling family, he still enjoys their company and finds the family’s eldest daughter, Tatiana, particularly intriguing. A romantic introvert, fond of idealistic novels and daydreaming, the young and impressionable Tatiana is immediately smitten with Onegin and instantly recognizes him as both her intended romantic partner and her savior. In the novel’s most famous passage (and later the opera’s most famous

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Tatiana bares her soul in an intimate and revealing letter to Onegin. Although he is “intensely moved” by the letter, Onegin patronizingly explains to Tatiana that he is “not made for [the] bliss” of marriage and that their union would ultimately end in dissatisfaction and boredom.\footnote{Pushkin, \textit{Onegin}, IV.11.2 and IV.14.1.}

Shortly after this intensely uncomfortable episode, Lensky drags Onegin along to Tatiana’s birthday celebration (Chapter Five). Onegin feels highly uncomfortable at the party, and in an act of revenge against Lensky, flirts and dances with Olga until her betrothed storms off in shock and extreme anger. An enraged and foolish Lensky challenges Onegin to a duel, and both men are ultimately too proud to cancel it. Onegin kills Lensky and, in remorse and without a friend in the world, leaves his home to travel and escape from the now haunting memories of his past. Five years later, Onegin is surprised to encounter a graceful, mature, and elegant Tatiana at an aristocratic dinner party. He almost immediately falls in love her, despite the fact that she is married to a prince and is content with her life. After writing her a series of imploring love letters that remain unanswered, Onegin finally confronts Tatiana in person, hopeful that she will leave her aristocratic lifestyle in pursuit of true happiness with him. Tatiana, in a monologue reminiscent of Onegin’s early rejection, questions the authenticity and integrity of his love and reminds him that he gave up the chance of finding happiness with her years ago. Eventually, though, Tatiana admits that she still loves Onegin, but insists on remaining true to her husband for the sake of honor. Ultimately, she bids Onegin a melodramatic goodbye, leaving him alone and in complete shock.
Pushkin’s Narrative Voices

Although most of the musicologists who have discussed Eugene Onegin typically refer to Pushkin’s novel as an outlet for the musings of a single narrator, Russian literary scholars typically discuss the work as a patchwork of multiple narrative voices. For example, author Marcus Levitt, a scholar of Russian history and literature, writes about Eugene Onegin as a work that not only involves multiple authorial perspectives, but also exists in two separate realities. As pointed out earlier, the brilliance and novelty of Pushkin’s work lies in the fact that, unlike Byron’s Childe Harold, a clear distinction exists between the author and the novel’s protagonist, “bringing these two aspects of authorial self into self-conscious dialogue.”8 In his novel, Pushkin largely separates himself from the character of Onegin, and he exists in the novel instead as the narrator (in some instances). This allows him to create a conversation of sorts between himself (representing reality) and his protagonist (or the world of novel in general—the fictional world of literature). He “[plays] them off one another, [and demonstrates] the fundamental interdependence of art and life, ‘literariness and ‘reality.”’9 Not only does the novel reveal Pushkin’s own commentary on a wide variety of issues from politics to German romanticism, but it also provides the author with an outlet to speak through the voice of an alter ego—that of the story’s narrator (Onegin’s “friend”). The use of this technique allows Pushkin to step out of the boundaries of traditional storytelling and comment on a plethora of ideas and issues that are not necessarily integral to the plot. In fact, the novel’s inclusion of a variety of intimate, clever, sarcastic, witty, or pessimistic tangents is one of its most exciting, memorable, and significant attributes.

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8 Levitt, “Onegin,” 42.
9 Ibid.
The complexity of the narration in *Eugene Onegin* is multifaceted. Besides the fact that through it Pushkin explores the relationship between reality and art in depth, the seemingly singular narrative voice is actually dual in nature. It is probably best then to discuss the novel’s narration in terms of *voices* rather than one voice. Levitt explains these two voices as “two opposing ontological realities . . . that of the narrator, who in Chapter One appears as a character, calling Onegin ‘my good friend,’ and that of *Evgenii Onegin*’s creator, who stands outside the text and refers to the ‘hero of my novel.’”\(^{10}\) The text of these narrators, permeated by ironic literary references and “more obvious meta-literary jokes,” assumes an extremely knowledgeable and educated audience.\(^{11}\) For example, besides frequently referencing famous contemporary authors (such as Byron and Tolstoy) by name and directly confronting their work, Pushkin also includes complex literary humor, as seen in the novel’s opening lines. Levitt points out that when Onegin references his uncle as a man of “‘most honest principles’”\(^{12}\) at the opening of the work’s first stanza, Pushkin (through his character) “[undercuts] the ostensible praise by echoing Ivan Krylov’s fable about an ‘ass of most honest principles,’ who, despite good intentions, tramples his master’s vegetable garden and gets a thrashing.”\(^{13}\) Obvious literary jokes include the humorous invocation of the Muse—an opening expected of a serious epic poem—and “the apology for skipping a formal epic introduction (postponed until the end of Chapter Seven).”\(^{14}\) Pushkin mocks the convention with a sarcastic tone and a late placement within the novel. After discussing Tatiana and her post-Onegin life for the majority of Chapter Seven, he includes the humorous final stanza:

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\(^{10}\) Ibid.
\(^{11}\) Ibid.
\(^{13}\) Levitt, “Onegin,” 42.
\(^{14}\) Ibid. The opening of Byron’s narrative poem *Childe Harold*, from which Pushkin drew great inspiration, also invokes the Muse.
But on a conquest here we shall congratulate
my dear Tatiana
and turn our course aside,
lest I forget of whom I sing . . .
And by the way, here are two words about it:
‘I sing a youthful pal
and many eccentricities of his.
Bless my long labor,
O you, Muse of the Epic!
And having handed me a trusty staff,
let me not wander aslant and askew.’
Enough! The load is off my shoulders!
To classicism I have paid my respects:
though late, but there’s an introduction.  

Pushkin here approaches prominent literary traditions with creative playfulness and makes it clear that the point of his novel is to pioneer new techniques and even to subvert convention. In general, this passage perfectly demonstrates the type of wit and satirical narrative voice that permeate the entire novel.

The complexity of Eugene Onegin’s literary construction also extends to its readers, or what Sonia Hoisington refers to as its narratees. The readers play a vital role in the novel’s construction, as they, like the work’s outspoken creator, are “[explicitly] present” and in the text. They are addressed directly throughout the novel, beginning in the second stanza when Pushkin writes,

The hero of my novel,
without preambles, forthwith,
I’d like to have you meet:
Onegin, a good pal of mine,
was born upon the Neva’s banks,
where maybe you were born,

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16 In The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory, the term “narratee” receives the following definition: “A term invented by Gerald Prince to denote the person to whom a narrator addresses his discourse. The narratee is not to be confused with the reader, who may be the ‘virtual reader’ (i.e. the kind of reader the narrator has in mind while composing the discourse), or the ‘ideal reader’ (i.e. the reader who understands everything the writer/narrator is saying and doing).” See J.A. Cuddon, *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, Fourth Edition (London: The Penguin Group, 1998), 529.
17 Ibid.
or used to shine, my reader!
There formerly I too promenaded—
but harmful is the North to me.  

While this technique allows readers to feel involved in the unfolding plot and in the narrator’s thought process, it also ultimately makes them subject to his whims. The narrator’s moodiness and sometimes self-contradictory personality frequently lead readers astray and cause confusion.

Unsurprisingly, and in keeping with the complexity of all other aspects of the novel, the readers referenced by Pushkin exist on a number of levels. First, as mentioned earlier and pointed out by Levitt, Pushkin has high expectations for his readers and writes for an audience with a certain amount of assumed intelligence and knowledge:

It is assumed that they will get the joke when Evgenii makes his reference to Krylov’s ass, that they are familiar with the problem of Byron’s authorial persona, as well as a plethora of other literary, cultural and historical information.

Additionally, the many purposefully blank stanzas and lines (marked by stanza or line numbers only) invite and “[challenge readers] to ‘fill in the blanks.’”

Levitt stresses that, while there are numerous reasons and purposes for these omissions, they ultimately emphasize “the open, unfinished, fragmented nature of the work.” Besides writing for an intellectually capable audience, Pushkin also writes for less adept narratees. Sonia Hoisington describes this as the novel’s “hierarchy of narratees,” “who are treated with differing degrees of irony, including parodic ‘mock readers,’ that is, readers whose misreadings are anticipated.” The readers are generally divided into two main groups—“friends” of the author and simple “readers.” While the “readers” are generally assumed to be foolish and ignorant (and most often become the prey

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18 Pushkin, *Onegin*, I.2.6-14.
19 Levitt, “Onegin,” 42.
20 Ibid.
22 Quoted in Levitt, “Onegin,” 43.
of the narrator’s harsh criticism and irony), the “friends” stand as fellow intellectuals and poets. Although these “friends” are most often treated as equals and insiders to the jokes, “they too are mocked at times.” Ultimately, the reader realizes that Pushkin does this purposefully as a means of questioning anyone and everyone involved in the novel or in the author’s life. In the end, no one is consistently taken seriously, and all readers become the object of Pushkin’s satirical attitude and mockery at one point or another.

That the novel was written over a period of eight years certainly contributes to its complexity, multiplicity of perspectives, and contradictions. Pushkin himself acknowledges but vocally decides to ignore the work’s contradictory nature in the final stanza of Eugène Onegin’s first chapter:

Of the plan’s form I’ve thought already
and what my hero I shall call.
Meantime, my novel’s
first chapter I have finished;
all this I have looked over closely;
the inconsistencies are very many,
but to correct them I don’t wish.
I shall pay censorship its due
and to the reviewers for the devourment
give away the fruits of my labors.\[^{25}\]

This quote not only demonstrates the self-conscious authorial presence in the novel, but also emphasizes the separation Pushkin wished to create between himself, or the novel’s narrator, and the characters living in Eugène Onegin’s fictional world. It is important to note that the novel’s narrator evolved simultaneously with Pushkin the actual man. During the span of years when the novel’s chapters were published sporadically, Pushkin, an outspoken literary radical, was unrelentingly abused, censored, and eventually exiled. Additionally, he had various love affairs during the writing of the novel, which also influenced the work’s content. For instance, his

\[^{24}\] Ibid.
\[^{25}\] Pushkin, Onegin, I.60.1-10.
admiration for the small feet of one of the women becomes simultaneously an obsession of
Eugene Onegin’s narrator. In essence, Pushkin’s novel functions as a social, personal, and
literary commentary. As Levitt observes:

If the first chapters recreate a relatively optimistic period of the poet’s life before
exile, the generally darker tone of the later chapters may be seen in the context of
Pushkin’s problematic attempts to come to terms with Nicholas’s new and
oppressive regime. The period of writing Evgenii Onegin also witnesses a major
shift in the poet’s critical standing, including a progressively more negative
reception of the novel itself. Pushkin lamented the lack of decent literary
criticism in Russia, and in Evgenii Onegin he compensated by offering a running
commentary on the problem of its own reception—with critics and journalists
being perhaps the bottom rung of the “hierarchy of narratees.”

Pushkin treated his novel, then, as an outlet not only for his literary creativity but also for his
frustration with the surrounding political and cultural instability. In contrast to the and muddled
author-protagonist relationship present in Byron’s Childe Harold, Pushkin’s Eugene Onegin,
with the presence of a self-conscious narrator, makes clear distinctions between the novel’s
author and its hero. This technique allowed Pushkin to comment, as an authoritative outsider, on
the society surrounding him and the society present in his novel in a way not seen previously in
literature.

Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin described the novel as an “anti-genre,” as it
does not fit into “the classical Aristotelian hierarchy of fixed lyric genres” but rather challenges
genre boundaries through the combination of varying literary techniques and the consequent
creation of new ones. Although Levitt comments that many twentieth-century scholars argue
that the work functions as poetry, he maintains that its “self-conscious” status as a novel in verse

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26 The narrator discusses small feet in multiple places, including in the first chapter. “I like furious youth, / the crush, the glitter, and the gladness, / and the considered dresses of the ladies; / I like their little feet; but then ’tis
doubtful / that in all Russia you will find / three pairs of shapely feminine feet. / Ah me, I long could not forget two
little feet! . . . Doleful, grown cool, / I still remember them, and in my sleep / they disturb my heart.” I.30.5-14.
27 Levitt, “Onegin,” 44.
demonstrates that in writing it, Pushkin purposely created a poetic work that took on novelistic qualities:

Narratives of the *Childe Harold* type, in which the authorial and fictional voice are one, may thus be equated to that of lyric poetry as a whole (especially love poetry), while the self-conscious writing of a novel in verse involves a fundamental break from the monological lyric persona where a single authoritative voice maintains control. This opens up space for a new “novelistic” discourse, which Bakhtin defined as dialogic and multi-voiced.  

Ultimately, Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* stands as an incredibly rich literary source and genre-bending work that offers to its readers a vast array of references, perspectives, and commentary. A revolutionary and unforgettable creation, Pushkin’s novel took the work of Byron one step further and quickly became the principal and initiating member of the Russian literary canon.

The Characters

Discussing Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* as a genre-bending novel in verse also allows scholars to examine the characters in novelistic terms. According to Levitt, these characters fluctuate within [the novel’s] “two realities,” appearing to possess a fundamental verisimilitude while also serving as literary devices and reflections of dialectically evolving authorial consciousness. In sharp contrast to the canonical “realist” novel that offers detailed context for a character’s behavior, thus circumscribing the reader’s ability or need to make independent judgments, *Evgenii Onegin* is open, fragmented, leaving much for the reader to “fill in.”

The characters’ existence within these two realities, as Levitt puts it, allows each to have their own narrative voice (demonstrating their “verisimilitude”) but also somewhat constricts them as they remain prey to the narrator’s oftentimes harsh commentary. On the other hand, the verse novel’s open-ended, fragmented, and poetic structure leaves it up to the reader to bridge many gaps, thus permitting numerous interpretations and giving the reader great imaginative flexibility

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31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
and creative power. Additionally, because the novel functions as both poetry and as a novel, the characters develop on two literary planes and “[emerge] through the interplay of lyric and novelistic perspectives that allow different degrees of self-revelation.”

Levitt points out that Pushkin’s characters, at least at the outset, come across as “archetypal in their simplicity,” which is, of course, in perfect keeping with the relatively straightforward nature of the verse novel’s plot. Like it does in all aspects of the work, however, this outward simplicity shrouds underlying complexity, making the multi-faceted and only semi-comprehensible characters worthy of extensive study. Levitt comments that Eugene Onegin’s “three main protagonists represent the three main novelistic traditions of the day, English, German, and French, that are presented consecutively in the first three chapters.”

Although none of the three main characters fit precisely into each literary mold, it can be said that, in general, Onegin “assumes the mantle of the English Byronic protagonist,” while Lensky becomes the voice of “German pre-Romantic and Romantic idealism,” and Tatiana, who “adopts sentimental epistolary novels as her own, those of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Mme de Staël, and Samuel Richardson,” functions as a typical Romantic heroine with overly dramatic, French tendencies.

**Onegin**

When Pushkin created the character of Onegin, he sought to create his own version of the Byronic hero, and the novel demonstrates his keen awareness of the qualities associated with this character type and its Napoleonic roots. As a character type, the figure of the Byronic hero first

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33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
35 Levitt, “Onegin,” 47.
36 Ibid.
appeared as the main protagonist in Lord Byron’s four-part narrative poem *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (published between 1812 and 1818). Childe Harold, a young, disillusioned, and intellectual womanizer, wanders the world seeking any activity that might bring him fulfillment or distraction from reality. Byron describes the character as someone whose “early perversion of mind and morals leads to satiety of past pleasures and disappointment in new ones.”

Although Childe Harold struggles with morality and embodies characteristics typically associated with romantic anti-heroes, including arrogance, moodiness, and selfishness, he attracts the reader’s sympathy and maintains an almost irresistible sensual charm. Characters with similarly dark qualities continued to appear as major figures in other works by Byron, including the disreputable title character in the satiric poem *Don Juan* (1818-1824). Ultimately, the concept of the imperfect but still overwhelmingly appealing hero inspired many Romantic-period authors to create works revolving around the adventures of their own Byronic heroes.

A significant characteristic of the original Byronic hero—its autobiographical nature—exists to a lesser extent in those created by later authors. Pushkin’s Onegin, for instance, although connected to some aspects of Pushkin’s personality, exists as a character who is in effect independent of his creator. Richard Freeborn elucidates that “Pushkin’s hero . . . was a ‘superfluous man,’ a product of those Western influences which had penetrated Russian society after the Napoleonic campaign. He was Byronic, both in inspiration and manner, but he was a Russian Byronic hero who adopted the pose of Byronism as a form of protest against prevalent conditions.”

Although he embodies many of the characteristics of Byron’s dark protagonists, Onegin represents a new version the character type. As the result of varying influences and

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many traditions, Pushkin’s protagonist is an innovative character type. In her article “The Anatomy of the Modern Self in The Little Tragedies,” author Svetlana Evdokimova, a scholar of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russian literature and culture, explains that Pushkin was “motivated by a desire to depict the distinctive traits of the younger generation of the nineteenth century” in his writings.\(^{39}\) Furthermore, Pushkin’s literary depictions of the nineteenth century and the people from that period are, as might be expected, heavily influenced by the political turmoil of the time. Evdokimova elucidates that,

Having lived during a time characterized by momentous transformations of culture and society, Pushkin sought to comprehend the impact of such crucial events of European history as the French Revolution and the rise of Napoleon. For Pushkin, the emergence of the contemporary man was first and foremost connected with a crisis of traditional aristocratic values ushered in by these events.\(^{40}\)

Pushkin broaches this topic directly in the second chapter of Eugene Onegin:

> But in our midst there’s even no such friendship: having destroyed all prejudices, we deem all people naughts and ourselves units. We all expect to be Napoleons; the millions of two-legged creatures for us are only tools; feeling to us is weird and ludicrous. More tolerant than many was Eugene, though he, of course, knew men and on the whole despised them; but no rules are without exceptions: some people he distinguished greatly and, though estranged from it, respected feeling.\(^{41}\)

In this passage, Pushkin explains “the impact of Napoleon on the consciousness of the modern man” and sets the character of Onegin up as a person whose character is very much shaped by


\(^{40}\) Ibid.

\(^{41}\) Pushkin, Onegin, II.14.
his cultural surroundings. Evdokimova, along with numerous other scholars, points out that “the emergence of the Byronic hero was directly connected with historical and social developments of Europe at the end of the eighteenth to the beginning of the nineteenth century.” On the other hand, she notes, “one must also acknowledge that the same historical circumstances were also responsible for the rise of the middle class,” and

the type of hero that best represented this class was an achiever—an ambitious, serious, calculative, and rational individual—like Napoleon. . . . Thus, both the type of the demonic rebel (such as Byron’s Cain or Corsair) and the type of the achiever (such as Stendhal’s Julien Sorel) develop from the same source: the myth of Napoleon.

Evdokimova goes on to note that Pushkin’s merging of Byron and Napoleon in the seventh chapter is accomplished with purpose and demonstrates the significance of both figures in the work. Tatiana comes across a portrait of Byron and a cast iron figure of Napoleon while exploring Onegin’s library, further illuminating the direct relationship between these two figures and the work’s protagonist. She sees “Lord Byron’s portrait, / and a small column with the puppet of cast-iron, / under a hat, with clouded brow, / with arms crosswise compressed.”

Evdokimova explains that Napoleon’s “clouded brow” is “symbolic of the type of man who emerges as the result of European revolutionary upheavals,” and his characteristics are ones that can also be associated with the Byronic hero, including “disregard for tradition, self-centeredness, immoralism, egoism, the subordination of means to ends, emotional coldness, and utilitarian rationalism.” By indicating that these personality traits can be tied to Napoleon and

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44 Ibid. In his drama Cain (1821), Byron revisits the story of Cain and Abel from Cain’s perspective. His narrative poem The Corsair (1814) tells the story of a social reject who wages war against humanity. Stendhal’s 1830 novel Le Rouge et le Noir (The Red and the Black) follows the life of Julien Sorel, a talented young man who attempts, but ultimately fails, to socially elevate himself.
45 Ibid.
46 Pushkin, Onegin, VII.19.11-14.
his era, Pushkin “links the appearance of the nineteenth-century man with precisely those historical circumstances that were responsible for the rise of the middle class, on the one hand, and the emergence of the Byronic hero, on the other.” The character of Eugene Onegin, then, is presented by Pushkin as a modern man whose Byronic traits are intimately and directly connected with his life experiences and the political and cultural environments surrounding him. Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin*, along with the works of other romantic authors, demonstrates the close connection between politics and fiction—without the rise of Napoleon, the social atmosphere that produced the concept of the Byronic hero would never have existed.

In addition to consistently referencing Byron throughout the work, Pushkin also constantly describes Onegin as a man who fits the mold of a typical Byronic hero. From his introduction in the first chapter, Onegin, “a young scapegrace,” is described as an educated dandy who was coddled as a child.

Fate guarded Eugene:
at first, Madame looked after him;
later, Monsieur replaced her.
The child was boisterous but nice.
Monsieur l’Abbé, a poor wretch of a Frenchman,
not to wear out the infant,
would teach him everything in play,
bothered him not with stern moralization,
scooled him slightly for his pranks,
and to the Letniy Sad took him for walks.

As an adult, Onegin, with “hair cut after the latest fashion” and “dressed like a London Dandy” found favor with society, for it was “decided / he was clever and very nice.” In following stanzas, though, the reader discovers a misunderstood and bored Onegin. Although well-versed in every scholastic subject, he has no real passion for any particular topic or area. Despite his

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boredom and in keeping with the Byronic image, however, Onegin is described as a man capable of extreme manipulation:

How early he was able to dissemble, 
conceal a hope, show jealousy, 
shake one’s belief, make one believe, 
seem gloomy, pine away, 
appear proud and obedient, 
attentive or indifferent! 
How languorously he was silent, 
how flamingly eloquent, 
in letters of the heat, how casual! 
With one thing breathing, one thing loving, 
how self-oblivious he could be! 
How quick and tender was his gaze, 
bashful and daring, while at times 
it shone with an obedient tear.\(^{52}\)

Onegin, although dispassionate and disinterested in things others find fascinating or significant, still maintains a certain power over others through false displays of emotion, passion, or interest. An expert manipulator, Onegin finds economic, real-life issues more intriguing than the idealism and beauty of ancient literature: he “dispraised Homer, Theocritus, / but read, in compensation, Adam Smith, / and was a deep economist.”\(^{53}\) Uninterested in the artificiality of the ancients, Pushkin’s protagonist instead seeks the realism that can be found in the study of something concrete, such as economic issues. Described as a disillusioned, somewhat jaded and calculating womanizer, Onegin becomes the ultimate Byronic hero. The reader knows exactly what to expect from him—that is, demonstrations of selfish and dispassionate behavior—for the rest of the verse novel. This honest and open introduction to the character of Onegin perfectly describes the protagonist, and readers have no excuse for surprise or shock at his eventual behavior.

Through these passages, Pushkin, or rather Onegin’s friend and the work’s narrator, present an

\(^{52}\) Pushkin, *Onegin*, I.10.  
\(^{53}\) Pushkin, *Onegin*, I.7.5-7.
upfront explanation for the ultimately unsatisfying conclusion and an excuse for the protagonist’s eventually disappointing behavior.

Onegin—possibly more so than any of the novel’s other main characters—experiences enormous and sudden transformation in the work and, by the final chapter, seems to rebel completely against the Byronic stereotype (although it must be noted that his supposed change may be artificial). Although he elevates himself above Tatiana and Lensky by refusing to live typically, he ultimately finds his existence unbearably dull: “Having in single combat killed his friend, / having lived without a goal, without exertions, / to the age of twenty-six, / oppressed by the inertia of leisure, / without employment, wife, or business, / could think of nothing to take up.”54 In an attempt to find personal satisfaction, he leaves the countryside, travels aimlessly, and eventually finds himself at a high-society ball where his is reacquainted with Tatiana.55 Even though Onegin discovers that Tatiana has been married to a nameless prince for two years, he falls hopelessly in love with her. In the stanzas describing Onegin’s immediate transformation from a cold and unfeeling fop to a lovesick product of romanticism, the narrator (who at this points speaks more as the omniscient author than as Onegin’s friend) provides the reader with a sympathetic and intimate glimpse into the character’s inner turmoil.

On the other hand, the narrator is sure to point out “how changed Tatiana is,” thus hinting at the possible artificiality of Onegin’s sudden affection, which may be based solely on her new social status.56 Ultimately, though, the narrator admits that “all ages are to love submissive,”57 and presents the reader with an infatuated Onegin who has, in essence, taken on the romantic characteristics of Tatiana and Lensky (the narrator even notes that “he almost went off his head /

54 Pushkin, Onegin, VIII.12.9-14.
55 See Pushkin, Onegin, VIII.13.
56 Pushkin, Onegin, VIII.28.1.
57 Pushkin, Onegin, VIII.29.1.
or else became a poet"\(^{58}\)). In a letter to Tatiana that echoes the one he received from her earlier in the novel, Onegin waxes eloquent about his newfound love and admits that his past rejection of her had been a horrible mistake: “I thought: liberty and peace / are a substitute for happiness. Good God! / What a mistake I made, how I am punished!”\(^{59}\) By discussing Onegin’s development into an impassioned would-be lover with a certain level of seriousness and respect, the narrator (and Pushkin) has been transformed in his own manner of thinking about the idealism of romanticism. It seems more likely, though, that Onegin’s transformation functions first and foremost as a literary device that exists in order to allow Pushkin’s irony to come full-circle. After all, no matter how much authorial sympathy is granted Onegin, he still ultimately finds himself rejected by the woman whom he first spurned.

**Lensky**

In the second chapter of the novel, the poet and romantic Vladimir Lensky receives a detailed introduction, and his role as both Onegin’s counterpart and as a representation of Pushkin becomes immediately obvious. Additionally, his connection to the idealism of German romanticism emerges not only throughout the chapter but is also stated directly in the ninth stanza:

> He wandered with a lyre on earth.  
> Under the sky of Schiller and of Goethe,  
> with their poetic fire  
> his soul had kindled;  
> and the exalted Muses of the art  
> he, happy one, did not disgrace:  
> he proudly in his songs retained

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\(^{58}\) Pushkin, *Onegin*, VIII.38.2-3. Later in this stanza, the narrator further strengthens Onegin’s new ties to romanticism and to Lensky: “How much a poet he resembled / when in a corner he would sit alone, / and the hearth flamed in front of him, / and he hummed ‘Benedetta’ / or ‘Idol mio,’ and would drop / into the fire his slipper or review.”

always exalted sentiments,
the surgings of a virgin fancy,
and the charm of grave simplicity.\textsuperscript{60}

This description presents the reader with a Lensky completely engrossed in all things associated
with romanticism and poetry in general. A wanderer with a lyre (Pushkin makes a clear allusion
to Greek myth here), he enjoys the art of poetry with a joyful simplicity and seeks to emulate
Schiller and Goethe, whom Pushkin describes as residing in the sky. To Lensky (and perhaps to
Pushkin the poet as well), the two constantly looming figures hold a deified status and are
connected to his experience of nature (Schiller and Goethe’s connection to the sky both indicates
their omnipresence in Lensky’s life and directly relates them to nature) in an intimate and
powerful way. In the prime of his life, the handsome and optimistic Lensky—at least up to this
point—has walked through life impervious to sorrow and pain: “From the world’s cold
depravity / not having yet had time to wither, / his soul was warmed / by a friend’s hail, by the
care of maidens. / In matters of the heart he was a winsome dunce. / Hope nursed him, / and
the globe’s new glitter and noise / still captivated his young mind.”\textsuperscript{61} Instead of praising Lensky
for his poetic talents, the narrator indicates that the young poet’s romantic idealism stands as the
result of his lack of world experience and naiveté.\textsuperscript{62} While the reader might expect a figure such
as Lensky to be lauded in a nineteenth-century novel (especially in one written by a poet), he is
instead presented as someone whose youth both restrains him from fully grasping reality and
from reaching his full potential as a poet and as a man. Author Frederick Alfred Lubich explains
that in the character of Lensky, “all of Pushkin’s doubts about the world of romantic illusions

\textsuperscript{60} Pushkin, \textit{Onegin}, II.9.5-15.
\textsuperscript{61} Pushkin, \textit{Onegin}, II.7.1-8
\textsuperscript{62} Pushkin, \textit{Onegin}, II.10.3. The tenth stanza of Chapter Two compares Lensky’s song to that of “a naïve
maid’s thoughts.” Pushkin, \textit{Onegin}, II.10.3.
crystallize into a clear-cut figure of parody.”⁶³ The boyish poet endures endless criticism from both Pushkin and the narrator in the novel, although it should be noted that he ultimately becomes the recipient of a sort of vindication at the work’s end, when Onegin, Pushkin’s hero, himself embraces romantic emotionalism when he expresses his love of Tatiana.

Lensky and Onegin, while oddly paired, together represent a sort of completeness that neither can achieve on his own. Despite the fact that the character of Lensky bears the brunt of Pushkin’s mockery (because he embodies the overt sentimentalism associated with romanticism), each man represents two different sides of Pushkin’s own persona. The two characters become fast friends despite their vast differences:

They got together; wave and stone,  
verse and prose, ice and flame,  
were not so different from one another.  
At first, because of mutual disparity,  
they found each other dull;  
they liked each other; then  
met riding every day on horseback,  
and soon became inseparable.  
Thus people—I’m the first to own to it—  
out of do-nothingness are friends.⁶⁴

Lensky, as a romantic poet, functions as “an ironic self-portrait of Pushkin himself,” and allows for clever authorial self-deprecation in the novel.⁶⁵ Onegin may also be viewed as representing other aspects of Pushkin—for instance, the character’s skepticism, especially in relation to overblown romantic idealism, corresponds with Pushkin’s own stance. Lubich describes how the two opposite characters represent Pushkin’s own complexity: “Whereas Lenski represents the romantic beginnings of the author’s own poetic career, Onegin—his ambivalent character

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notwithstanding—embodies various biographical and philosophical aspects of Pushkin, the mature and critical artist.”

Pushkin’s discomfort with Lensky’s overly sentimental poetry and approach to life reflects the fact that although he lived squarely in the romantic era, “[he] remained a classicist. . . . Temperamentally an eighteenth-century aristocrat, Pushkin was not comfortable with public displays of embarrassment. He did not believe, as Dostoevsky and Tolstoy so earnestly did, that gestures of self-humiliation were proof of a person’s sincerity.”

Although a work of romantic literature, *Eugene Onegin* lacks the sentimentality of other literary pieces from the period and even mocks—especially through its treatment of Lensky—demonstrations of overt emotionalism.

The duel fought between Lensky and Onegin in Chapter Six represents the height of the two characters’ connection to Pushkin, who himself fought nearly thirty duels and eventually died after suffering a mortal wound in one at the young age of thirty-seven. Lubich comments that,

> In an ingenious stroke of romantic self-parody, Pushkin uses Onegin, his present alter ego of sorts, to deal an ironic coup de grâce against his former poetic self. As for Lenski, he cannot help playing his role with appropriately bad style up to the very end. The power of romantic self-deception, which had forced him into the duel in the first place, gets the better of him even in his last moment of truth when Onegin fires the shot. . . . He ends his short life, worn out by an overwrought imagination, with a final gesture of mock-heroic self-defeat.

Pushkin describes this gesture, and the entire drama of Lensky’s premature death, with language dripping in faux reverence: “Gently he lays his hand upon his breast / and falls. . . . / The youthful bard / has met with an untimely end!”

Prior to the duel, Pushkin’s narrator provides the novel’s readers with a copy of Lensky’s final poem, in which he dramatically laments the

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passing of his “springtime’s golden days” and bemoans the fact that he will surely be quickly forgotten after his death.⁷⁰ In the stanza immediately following the reproduction of the ominous poem, the novel’s narrator dismisses it: “Thus did he write, ‘obscurely’ and ‘limply’ / (what we call romanticism— / though no romanticism here in the least / do I see; but what’s that to us?), / and, before dawn, at last / sinking his weary head, / at the fashionable word ‘ideal,’ / Lenski dozed off gently.”⁷¹ The narrator further dismisses Lensky and his death in stanza thirty-six, when he writes that the readers (“my friends”) feel “sorry for the poet” but does not admit to reacting with any real remorse himself.⁷² He continues his cruel and insincere eulogy to Lensky by admitting that the poet’s premature death may have prevented the world from enjoying timeless verses, but then, in the next stanza, immediately writes,

And then again: perhaps, the poet
had a habitual lot awaiting him.
The years of youth would have elapsed:
the fervor of the soul cooled down in him.
He would have changed in many ways,
have parted with the Muses, married,
up in the country, happy and cornuted,
have worn a quilted dressing gown;
learned life in its reality,
at forty, had the gout,
drunk, eaten moped, got fat, decayed,
and in his bed, at last,
died in the midst of children,
weepy females, and medicos.⁷³

⁷⁰ Pushkin, Onegin, VI.21.4. The complete letter may be found in the twenty-first and twenty-second stanzas of chapter six.
⁷¹ Pushkin, Onegin, VI.23.1-8. Lensky’s gushy poem receives extremely serious treatment in Tchaikovsky’s opera, furthering the disparity between the two works and making obvious the fact that Pushkin’s and Tchaikovsky’s creations express unique worldviews.
⁷² Pushkin, Onegin, VI.36.1.
⁷³ Pushkin, Onegin, VI.38. The previous stanza (thirty-seven) discusses the slim (according to the narrator’s tone) possibility of Lensky’s early death preventing the world from experiencing ageless poetry.
Although the obvious relationship between the poet Pushkin and poet Lensky make it seem likely that the author would express empathy toward his character, Pushkin instead takes the opportunity to create an ironic situation and, in a way, imply a self-deprecatory attitude.

_Tatiana_

Tatiana, similarly to Lensky, functions as a truly romantic character in the novel. Obsessed with sentimental novels, she takes on the characteristics associated with their female protagonists and herself becomes the typical romantic heroine. Despite her similarities to Lensky, however, the novel’s narrator treats her more sympathetically than he does the poet. This can likely be attributed to the fact that Tatiana overcomes romantic sentimentality when she finally rejects Onegin’s obsessive pleas in favor of remaining faithful to her husband at the novel’s end. Unlike Onegin, Lensky, and Olga, Tatiana matures significantly as a character and ultimately accepts and even embraces her reality, despite the fact that she never finds it completely satisfying. For the vast majority of Pushkin’s novel, though, her personality remains idealistic and even naïve. The opposite of her extroverted and shallow younger sister, Tatiana obsesses over romantic novels and allows them to become her vision of an ideal reality. As a serious and wistful introvert, she lives outside of society’s expectations for a young woman, and therefore feels isolated and seeks refuge in the fictional world of literature. Furthermore, her sheltered existence in the countryside only adds to her feelings of isolation and her distorted understanding of life and love.

Like Lensky and her sister Olga, Tatiana receives an introduction in Chapter Two. Her introduction appears directly after Olga’s, making obvious the distinction between the two girls. Even though the length of Tatiana’s introduction does not at all exceed Lensky’s, it becomes
immediately apparent that the narrator finds her more dear: “Her sister was called Tatiana. / For the first time with such a name / the tender pages of a novel / we’ll whimsically grace. / And why not? / It is pleasing, sonorous.”⁷⁴ Also without delay, the narrator makes clear her individuality and existence outside of established social norms and even outside of the norms of her own family: “Sauvage, sad, silent, / as timid as the sylvan doe, / in her own family / she seemed a strangeling. / She was not apt to snuggle up / to her father or mother; / a child herself, among a crowd of children, / wished not to play or skip, / and often all day long, alone, sat silent by the window.”⁷⁵ The narrator continues his discussion of Tatiana by associating her directly with romantic literature: “She early had been fond of novels; / for her they replaced all; / she grew enamored with the fictions of Richardson and of Rousseau.”⁷⁶ Thus, Tatiana’s introverted, “abnormal,” and naïve personality becomes firmly established through her somewhat brief but telling introduction in the novel’s second chapter.

Like Onegin, but perhaps to a lesser extent, Tatiana’s character transforms during the course of the novel. Unlike Onegin, though, Tatiana’s transformation can be connected to typical human development and the far from unusual acceptance of reality that so often accompanies the necessary transition from childhood to adulthood. Ultimately, Tatiana ceases to live the false reality of girlhood and instead accepts reality and becomes a socially acceptable member of society. Levitt points out that, “Like the author-narrator in the final stanzas, her position suggests a mature elegiac sense of the world, one of loss and lost possibilities, but also of clear-sighted vision.”⁷⁷ As pointed out earlier, the novel’s harshest irony lies in the fact that Tatiana and Onegin—by the final chapter—have in many ways exchanged personality traits,

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⁷⁴ Pushkin, Onegin, II.24.1-5.
⁷⁵ Pushkin, Onegin, II.25.5-14.
⁷⁶ Pushkin, Onegin, II.29.1-4.
keeping them once again from achieving an ideal happiness. On the other hand, Tatiana’s acceptance of reality and insistence upon remaining faithful to her husband indicate that her new personality morally exceeds that of the typical Byronic hero. Furthermore, even though Tatiana has given up the romantic idealism of her youth, she tragically admits that she still does love Onegin and therefore cannot be entirely separated from qualities related to romanticism. In the end, Tatiana simultaneously becomes the novel’s most respectable and realistic character and its most tragic one. Ultimately, she is the only character who truly grows, changes, and develops for the better—even though she initially perceives reality as a naïve romantic, she eventually embraces reality. The dull life of acceptance and habit discussed in relationship to her mother and her nurse in Chapter Two becomes her own life, despite the fact that she made a fierce attempt to create a new reality for herself. Because she finally accepts her fate and even embraces her reality, she rises up as a character of great moral strength. In the cruel but realistic world of Pushkin’s novel, individuality has no place, and those living outside of society’s norms must eventually conform in order to function.

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78 Tatiana’s admission of love can be found in the forty-seventh stanza of Chapter Eight: “I love you (why dissimulate?); / but to another I’ve been given away: / to him I shall be faithful all my life.”
CHAPTER II. THE OPERA

Introduction

In scholarship, the opera *Eugene Onegin* has long been directly connected to the dramatic circumstances in Tchaikovsky’s life that surrounded its creation. The composer, influenced by romanticism, often sought to create works with which he felt a profound personal connection or bond. It makes perfect sense, then, that the composer chose to transform Pushkin’s famous novel into an opera primarily because he felt a deep connection to the story’s characters.\(^1\) Furthermore, after seeing Georges Bizet’s *Carmen* in January of 1876, Tchaikovsky “only cared for a similar subject: a libretto dealing with real men and women who stood in closer touch with modern life; a drama which was at once simple and realistic.”\(^2\) Although Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* claimed a permanent place in the Russian literary canon first and foremost because of its language and use of unique and ground-breaking literary techniques, Tchaikovsky chose to use it as the source for an opera because of its characters and the personal connection he felt to them and particularly to Tatiana. The resulting opera—saturated with lyricism, harmonic richness, and colorful orchestration—flaunts itself as a highly romanticized version of Pushkin’s tale. Tatiana, who sings the opera’s most breathtaking music, takes center stage in the opera, outshining Onegin and, less surprisingly, Lensky, in every possible way.

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\(^1\) Tchaikovsky composed a total of ten operas, three of which use Pushkin texts as their primary source. *Eugene Onegin* is his first Pushkin-inspired opera, followed by *Mazeppa* (1881-1883) and *The Queen of Spades* (1890). Each of these three operas reflects Tchaikovsky’s desire to produce intimate and relatable works.

Tchaikovsky and the Opera

On 18 May 1877, Tchaikovsky wrote letters to his brothers Anatoli and Modest about his new idea for an opera libretto. In one of the letters, he first rejected a libretto that had been sent to him by Modest and complained that it lacked continuity, a meaningful plot, and interesting characters:

What I have to say about Inessa is: The idea does not appeal to me at all and I have no desire to start working on it—a sure sign that this libretto has not got the basis of a good opera. Inessa’s sufferings are romantic-dramatical, very much in the style of a cheap novel. No proper characters in the plot; Pedrina is an interesting figure but she appears only in the first act. The “disguise” scene in the second act is unnatural and tedious. The whole thing is unpoetical and has no continuity! No Modia, my friend, you are no good as librettist but thank you all the same for the effort.

This statement emphasizes that Tchaikovsky wished to set to music a work with meaningful characters that would not only translate well into a libretto, but that also stood on its own as a great work of literature with a realistic storyline. On 25 May 1877, Tchaikovsky had dinner at the home of his friend Elizaveta Lavrovskiaia, an opera singer. While discussing new ideas for an opera libretto, Lavrovskiaia suddenly suggested Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* as a possible source. The composer, although initially unsure but certainly intrigued by the idea, was quickly won over by the suggestion. He spared no time in writing to his brother Anatoli about the possibility of the new opera, and he explained that he planned to

write a charming opera which is absolutely in keeping with my musical character. You will be astonished when you hear what it is. All those to whom I have mentioned it at first are astonished and then delighted. . . . and the opera is going to be Eugene Onegin. The libretto is charmingly constructed.

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3 Modest’s libretto was based on *Inès de las Sierras* (1837) by the French author Charles Nodier (1780-1844).


5 Tchaikovsky to Anatoli Tchaikovsky, 18 May 1877, in *Letters*, 116-117.
Both Anatoli and Modest expressed dismay at their brother’s choice for a source. Anatoli wrote, “I just cannot imagine an opera on Eugene Onegin could be any good, and am very upset that you have chosen this subject.” As pointed out by Richard Taruskin, the astonishment of those who became aware of Tchaikovsky’s chosen subject was likely rooted in the fact that Pushkin’s novel “was just coming into its own as an object of canonical veneration around the time Chaikovsky and his poet friend Konstantin Shilovsky dared to adapt it.” Taruskin continues to explain that many viewed adapting Pushkin’s novel for operatic use as almost sacrilegious, for it was beloved not for its plot or (with one exception) for its character—the only parts of a literary work that most literary people think transferable to another medium. Rather, it is adored for what Nabokov called “the divine details”—the verbal dazzle (that is, the music that Pushkin had already out there), the wry social commentary, the perfectly exact descriptions, the endlessly subtle and nuanced characterizations, the interrelationship of literary and social conventions, all conveyed by a famously intrusive narrator’s voice. It is a work of narrative art that is loved for the telling, not the tale. It calls such delightful attention to itself as a work of art, and as a specifically verbal construction containing so many verbal pleasures of an absolutely unparaphrasable kind, that it is small wonder it has been declared sacrosanct by the scholars who earn their livelihoods by dissecting those aspects of it that are beyond the reach of music (or so they think).

Pushkin’s novel, which appeared in its completion over forty years earlier, had long been revered by Russians as a masterpiece and influential member of their literary canon. While Eugene Onegin’s venerated place as a work of literature makes it unsurprising that Tchaikovsky’s choice of libretto came as a shock to many, the work’s unique literary qualities added to its attraction as a possible libretto source. Pushkin’s novel, with its simplicity of plot, realistic nature, beautifully poetic language and literary depth, provided the composer with what he considered a perfect starting point for an intimate and relatable opera. Because the novel combines the epic, lyric,

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6 Anatoli Tchaikovsky to Tchaikovsky, date unspecified, in Letters, 120.
7 Taruskin, “Literary Folk,” 106.
8 Ibid.
and novel genres and makes use of a multifaceted, self-conscious narrator, it presented unique possibilities and challenges for an opera libretto. Additionally, the work’s uniquely poetic language and structure made it an ideal source for an opera meant to have distinctively rich verbal qualities.

Tchaikovsky wrote to Modest about how he came to choose Pushkin’s novel as the source for his next opera, and explained to his brother that, initially, even he had found the idea of creating a musical version of *Eugene Onegin* somewhat impossible. He recalled that after rereading the novel, however, he became passionate about the plot:

> How glad I am to get rid of Ethiopian princesses, Pharaohs, poisonings and all that sort of pompous convention. Onegin is full of poetry. I know very well that there will be no scenic effects and little movement in this opera; but the lyrical quality, the humanity, and the simplicity of the story, and a text written by a genius, will compensate more than enough for these failings.  

Tchaikovsky became increasingly obsessed with the idea of the opera, as demonstrated in a letter he wrote to a friend the next day: “The fact is that I simply must compose this opera, I have an irresistible urge to composition and cannot lose a minute of precious time.”

Tchaikovsky composed *Eugene Onegin* between 1877 and 1878, and its premiere, conducted by Nicolai Rubinstein, took place on 29 March 1879 at the Maly Theater in Moscow. Because of the opera’s intimate nature and lack of lavish sets and exaggerated dramatic elements, Tchaikovsky chose to have students of the Moscow Conservatory perform the work. Received with mild enthusiasm, the work grew in popularity only gradually. In 1881 it was performed at the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow, and its first performance outside of Russia

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10 Tchaikovsky to Lev Davydov, 19 May 1877, in *Letters*, 119. It should be pointed out that numerous other composers set to music the works of Pushkin, including Modest Mussorgsky (*Boris Godunov*) and César Cui (*The Prisoners of the Caucasus, Feast in the Time of Plague, and The Captain’s Daughter*). Boris Gasparov has commented that “in opera alone there are no fewer than 141 works based on Pushkin’s oeuvre.” See Boris Gasparov, “Pushkin in Music,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Pushkin*, ed. Andrew Kahn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 159. While the music of Mussorgsky and Cui is steeped in Russian nationalism, Tchaikovsky’s compositional style is very much part of the Western art music tradition.
occurred in Prague in 1888. Another notable performance outside of Tchaikovsky’s homeland occurred on 19 January 1892 in Hamburg, under the direction of Gustav Mahler. Tchaikovsky wrote with enthusiasm about the performance in Germany: “The singers, the orchestra, the producers, the conductor (they call him Mahler) are all in love with Eugene Onegin.” 11 The opera gradually became known throughout Europe, and was first performed in Vienna on 19 November 1897, again conducted by Gustav Mahler. In 1920 the opera finally reached the United States, where it was performed at the Metropolitan Opera. Eugene Onegin ultimately claimed a permanent place in standard operatic repertoire and still receives more performances than Tchaikovsky’s remaining nine operas.

Eugene Onegin, the composer’s fifth opera, “marks a turning point in Tchaikovsky’s operatic output, away from the overtly nationalistic style of The Voevoda, The Oprichnik, and Vakula the Smith.” 12 The opera, which includes only limited nationalistic elements, demonstrates that the composer found more musical inspiration in the works of Verdi, Bizet, and Massenet than he did in the music of his Russian counterparts. Tchaikovsky composed the opera during a highly eventful time in his life musically and personally. In January 1876 he viewed Bizet’s Carmen in Paris and, because he was profoundly impacted by the work, became increasingly intrigued by the concept of incorporating fatalistic elements in his compositions and in the idea of producing a similarly intimate opera. During the same year he attended the first complete performance of Wagner’s Der Ring des Nibelungen at Bayreuth and, in a review for

12 Henry Zajaczkowski, An Introduction to Tchaikovsky’s Operas (Westport, CT and London: Praeger Publishers, 2005), 33. Tchaikovsky’s four previous operas are The Voevoda (1867-1868), Undine (1869), the score of which the composer destroyed in 1875, The Oprichnik (1870-1872), and Vakula the Smith (1874), which was revised and given a the new title of Cherevichki the following year. Tchaikovsky composed five more operas after completing Eugene Onegin, including Mazeppa (1881-1883) and The Queen of Spades (1890), both of which are also based upon literature by Pushkin.
The Russian Register, expressed extreme distaste for the cycle. In 1877, he began work on his Fourth Symphony in F minor and also began composing Eugene Onegin before entering into his doomed marriage with Antonina Milyukova. After the dramatic collapse of his marriage, Tchaikovsky fled to Switzerland in order to recover from a nervous breakdown and also began receiving a stipend from Nadezhda von Meck, which allowed him to focus entirely on composition. The following year saw the completion of numerous works, including the Fourth Symphony and Eugene Onegin, and during the same year the composer resigned from his professorship at the Moscow Conservatoire and “[commenced] a wandering existence that would continue for the next seven years.” He also began composing his next opera, The Maid of Orléans, which he completed in 1879.

The Libretto

Tchaikovsky and his close friend Konstantin Shilovsky (1849-1893), an amateur poet and actor, worked together to create a libretto based on Pushkin’s novel. The composer chose to include seven sections of the novel in his Eugene Onegin, and called the completed musical work a set of “lyric scenes” in three acts—not an opera—thus acknowledging the composition’s intimate nature and, possibly, the novel’s fragmentary qualities. Although Tchaikovsky and Shilovsky carefully chose to include the most vital scenes from the novel in the opera, several significant parts of Pushkin’s work were omitted, causing potential breaks in the story’s linear movement. At the time of the opera’s composition, however, Tchaikovsky knew that most Russians would be familiar with Pushkin’s story and quite capable of filling in any blanks. Additionally, the somewhat disjointed nature of the novel (as discussed in Chapter One) invited a

13 Zajaczkowski, Tchaikovsky’s Operas, 107.
14 Zajaczkowski, Tchaikovsky’s Operas, 108.
similarly fragmented operatic rendition. The two most noteworthy omissions made in the opera included Tatiana’s revealing dream from the novel’s fifth chapter and her visit to Onegin’s unoccupied home in the seventh chapter. In the novel, both chapters play a significant role in bringing to light significant information about Tatiana, Onegin, and the story in general.\(^\text{15}\) That Tchaikovsky’s completed opera still enjoyed great overall success despite these omissions can surely be attributed to its lush orchestration, memorable melodies, and successfully crafted dramatic content.

As one might expect, Tchaikovsky chose to set to music the most dramatic episodes from the novel, those that involve the main characters’ experiences and relationships. Organized into three acts and seven scenes, the opera’s action represents only the most pivotal moments from the novel and, in general, omits the narrator’s text. In the first scene of Act One, Tchaikovsky and Shilovsky combined plot elements from Pushkin’s second and third chapters: after the Larin family receives an introduction, Lensky stops by to visit Olga. He introduces his neighbor and friend, Onegin, to the family. In order to properly introduce the story’s main protagonist, Tchaikovsky and Shilovsky included in the libretto—as text sung by Onegin—the novel’s (and the character of Onegin’s) opening lines: “My uncle has most honest principles: / when taken ill in earnest, / he has made one respect him / and nothing better could invent. / To others his example is a lesson; / but, good God, what a bore / to sit by a sick man both day and night, / without moving a step away!”\(^\text{16}\) The rest of the material in Tchaikovsky’s first scene stems from the novel’s second and third chapters (Chapter One is almost exclusively comprised of flavorful and witty background information regarding Onegin, literary jokes, and social commentary), and

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\(^\text{15}\) For example, the reader learns about Tatiana’s erotic desire for Onegin in Chapter Five, while Chapter Seven includes a detailed discussion of Onegin’s library, and Pushkin takes this opportunity to further connect his novel to Byron and Napoleon (this is discussed in detail in Chapter One).

only minimal text spoken by Pushkin’s narrator is included. An obvious instance of this occurs when Madame Larina and the nurse sing nostalgically about their pasts and their current lots: “Routine is a gift from above, it is a substitute for happiness. Yes indeed.”17 In the novel, the narrator relates to the reader the story of Madame Larina’s past, and explains that after almost divorcing her husband, Tatiana’s mother “became habituated, and content.”18 The narrator then adds his own commentary, musing in the well-known words of François-René de Chateaubriand that “Habit to us is given from above: / it is a substitute for happiness.”19 In the second scene, Tatiana composes her lovesick letter to Onegin, and in the third scene Onegin arrives at the estate to deliver his “sermon” (from the novel’s fourth chapter). The somewhat patronizing monologue has long been referred to as Onegin’s sermon by readers of the novel, partly because the novel’s narrator explains that “thus Eugene preached” in the stanza following its delivery.20

The second act, composed of two scenes, incorporates material almost entirely from the novel’s fifth and sixth chapters (Tatiana’s lengthy dream, related in Chapter Five, is omitted). Tatiana’s name-day party, which ends with a jealous and foolish Lensky insisting on dueling Onegin, makes up the first scene, and the second scene revolves around the fateful duel. Besides the obviously necessary inclusion of Onegin’s speech to Tatiana, Tchaikovsky omitted the majority of the novel’s fourth chapter, which, like chapter one, is comprised almost entirely of commentary from the narrator (in this case most of the commentary revolves around Onegin and Tatiana). Descriptive information about Onegin and Tatiana from Chapter Four, however, clearly influenced Tchaikovsky’s composition (for instance, the narrator explains that “Onegin

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like a regular Childe Harold lapsed into pensive indolence” and that Tatiana “fades away, / grows pale, is wasting, and is silent! / Nothing interests her / or stirs her soul”).

The opera’s third act, comprised of two scenes, includes the ballroom scene from the novel’s eighth chapter, in which Onegin and Tatiana are reacquainted after a five-year separation, and the novel’s last episode, in which Tatiana responds to Onegin’s confession of love. The novel’s seventh, penultimate chapter, offers explanatory information describing Tatiana’s transition from a young country girl into an elegant prince’s wife and is not included in the opera. A noteworthy addition to the novel made by Tchaikovsky in the first scene of Act Three occurs when Tatiana’s husband, nameless in the novel but made more human and real as Prince Gremin in the opera, sings an aria about his genuine love for his bride. Only the opening of the aria’s text is taken from the novel, and it comes from a narrator’s aside meant to relate to Onegin’s newfound love of Tatiana, not the prince’s: the narrator explains that “All ages are to love submissive; / but to young virgin hearts / its impulses are beneficial / as are spring storms to fields.” In the opera, Prince Gremin sings “All ages are obedient to love, its impulses are beneficial / to both a young man, who has just barely seen the world, / and to a gray-haired warrior tempered by life!”

Thus, Tchaikovsky took a clever opening line by Pushkin and turned it into something completely different. The addition of this aria not only adds importance to the character of Tatiana’s husband, but also changes the flavor of the story’s conclusion by letting the audience know that there is a measure of genuine happiness, or at least contentedness, to be found in Tatiana and Gremin’s marriage. Like her mother at the opening of the opera, then, Tatiana discovers that through acceptance—and with the help of habit and routine—her disappointing life can become satisfactory.

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23 Libretto, 287.
Despite the fact that almost the entirety of the opera’s libretto comes directly from Pushkin’s text, it famously received criticism from influential figures in Russian literature as soon as it was set to music. It has often been repeated that in a letter to Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy (1828-1910), Ivan Turgenev (1818-1883) wrote that “the music is doubtless remarkable, but what a libretto!”

Taruskin writes that “the judgment has been parroted, first in deference to Turgenev, later to Nabokov, by generations of ‘Slavists,’ many of whom have probably never seen or heard the opera.”

In the lengthy commentary written to accompany his 1964 English translation of Pushkin’s verse novel, Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977) referred to the musical counterpart as “Chaikovsky’s silly opera” and “slapdash.”

Tolstoy’s and Nabokov’s criticism, at its roots, reflects the two writers’ almost extreme reverence for Pushkin’s novel and their refusal to judge Tchaikovsky’s opera using musical criteria. Other scholars, in response, argue that these types of criticism regarding the opera’s text demonstrate fundamental misconceptions and lack validity. Boris Gasparov, professor in the Slavic languages department at Columbia University and a musicologist and linguist, writes that “this attitude entirely misses the point because an opera is not about Pushkin’s ‘words’ but about his narrative. The displacement of the literary prototype does take place, but it stems primarily from the fact that Pushkin’s characters and situations reappear in an opera written in a different historical epoch, by an artist who reflects the aesthetic and psychological sensibilities of his own time.”

Gasparov’s central point explains the relationship between Tchaikovsky’s opera and Pushkin’s novel. He argues that the transformation of any written text into a musical genre necessitates certain changes and, more importantly, that each new opera or musical work will reflect above all else the particular social,

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political, and cultural surroundings of its creator. Furthermore, Gasparov elucidates that musical creations based on the writings of Pushkin by necessity demonstrate that the primary challenge of their composers “stemmed more from their awareness of the work of the predecessors than from their direct ‘dialogue’ with Pushkin’s poetry.”\textsuperscript{28} This view of the transformation from literary mediums to musical ones will be revisited later, when varying criticisms of the relationship between Pushkin’s text and Tchaikovsky’s opera are discussed in more detail.

Tchaikovsky and the Characters

Even before deciding to create an opera based on Pushkin’s novel, Tchaikovsky had long been interested in setting the famous letter scene from the end of Chapter Three to music. In the novel, the narrator facetiously offers “an incomplete, feeble translation” of Tatiana’s letter, which he explains she wrote in French, further associating her character with French romanticism (see Chapter One).\textsuperscript{29} Tchaikovsky composed this central, lengthy scene first, and through it firmly established the deep and intimate connection he felt with the character of Tatiana. After beginning work on this scene, Tchaikovsky wrote:

Still lacking not only a libretto, but even any [final] general plan of the opera, I began to write the letter music, succumbing to an invincible spiritual need to do this. . . . Being completely immersed in composition, I so thoroughly identified myself with the image of Tatyana that she became for me like a living person, together with everything that surrounded her. I loved Tatyana, and was furiously indignant with Onegin who seemed to me a cold, heartless fop.\textsuperscript{30}

In this scene (as in much of the opera), he set Pushkin’s text verbatim, and included every line from Tatiana’s letter. Through the music used to set this scene, Tchaikovsky demonstrates the

\textsuperscript{28} Gasparov, “Pushkin in Music,” 160.
\textsuperscript{29} Pushkin, “Onegin,” III.31.11. The narrator explains that the richness of Tatiana’s letter does not allow for a truly accurate translation, and he only provides “an incomplete, feeble translation, / the pallid copy of a vivid picture.”
complexity of Tatiana’s character. The letter scene represents the opera’s longest and most complex solo section (Lensky’s “Kuda, kuda vï udalilis” [“Where, o where have you disappeared?”] is the only somewhat comparable aria), further establishing the deep and sympathetic bond Tchaikovsky felt with the novel’s heroine. In a letter written to Modest in June of 1877, the composer wrote, “Let my opera not be scenic, let it have too little action but, I am in love with the image of Tatiana, I am completely charmed with Pushkin’s poetry, and am writing music to it because I am drawn to it and am engrossed in the composition of the opera.”

Tchaikovsky’s deep emotional connection to Pushkin’s novel and especially to the character of Tatiana relates directly to the fact that the composer produced the opera during one of the most turbulent and dramatic periods of his life. Musicologist and Tchaikovsky biographer David Brown writes that “the circumstances in which Eugene Onegin was composed are inextricably entwined with the whole strange and traumatic episode of Tchaikovsky’s marriage.” In May of 1877, Tchaikovsky received a letter from a forgotten ex-student named Antonina Ivanovna Milyukova containing a declaration of love. Milyukova persisted in contacting Tchaikovsky until he finally decided to marry her, and the two wed on 18 July 1877. After only two and half months of what Brown refers to as “nominal conjugality,” a distraught Tchaikovsky fled to St. Petersburg, bringing the marriage to an end. The composer’s correspondence with his brothers in the months preceding and during the marriage reveals his inner turmoil and motives for marrying. Tchaikovsky scholar Alexander Poznansky elucidates that while family pressure “provided . . . strong motivation for [his] decision to marry,” his “main concern . . . pertained to the constant rumors about his homosexuality spreading by word

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31 Tchaikovsky to Modest Tchaikovsky, 9 June 1877, in Letters, 119.
32 Brown, Crisis Years, 137.
33 Ibid.
of mouth in Moscow and St. Petersburg.” In a letter to his main patroness, Nadezhda von Meck, Tchaikovsky wrote that his decision to marry “was supported by the fact that the sole dream of my eighty-two-year-old father and all my relatives is that I should marry.”

Other letters reveal that Tchaikovsky’s simultaneous work on *Eugene Onegin* played a role in his decision to marry as well. In a letter to a friend, he wrote,

> Having received a second letter from Miss Milyukova, I was ashamed, and even became indignant with myself for my attitude towards her. . . . In my mind this is all tied up with the idea of Tatyana, and it seemed to me that I myself had acted incomparably more basely than Onegin, and I became truly angry with myself for my heartless attitude towards this girl who was in love with me.

Not wishing to assume the cold personality of Onegin in his real life, Tchaikovsky instead desired to take up the compassion and romanticism associated with Tatiana. Although the opera is more than a reflection of the composer’s personal life, private letters make it clear that Tchaikovsky did indeed feel an intimate and personal connection to the opera’s story and characters. In fact, the quotation above and the composer’s romantic circumstance at the time of the opera’s composition indicate that a very real and influential relationship—at least in Tchaikovsky’s mind—existed between his life and his work. The composer feared that he had not only taken on Onegin’s cold characteristics but that he had even behaved “more basely” than Pushkin’s hero. Because Tchaikovsky associated Milyukova with Tatiana—a character he adored—he chose to absolve himself of his past actions by accepting her love rather than dismissing it. Choosing this course of action made him believe that he had not only defeated

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35 Tchaikovsky to Nadezhda von Meck, 15 July 1877, in *Crisis Years*, 141.
36 Quoted in Brown, *Crisis Years*, 143.
Onegin, but that he had also paid homage to the image of Tatiana—an image ever-present in his troubled mind.

The Music

Both Tchaikovsky’s deep love for the character of Tatiana and his general disrespect for the character of Onegin translate clearly into the opera. While the composer’s love of Tatiana can be traced to earlier points in his life, the intense drama of his marriage certainly enhanced and even altered how he thought about Pushkin’s story and characters. That the composition of the opera coincided exactly with both his initial correspondence with Milyukova and his eventual marriage further strengthens the claim that the opera can be viewed as an intimate illustration of Tchaikovsky’s emotional turmoil. Although Tchaikovsky and Shilovsky meticulously preserved Pushkin’s text overall, the composer’s personal opinions of the novel’s characters become clear through the opera’s music. While Tatiana, with whom Tchaikovsky sympathized most deeply, receives the opera’s most colorful and lyrically driven music, Onegin sings less memorable lines with simpler orchestral accompaniment. Some of the protagonist’s music—especially when compared to that of Tatiana or even Lensky—can even be described as stale. Additionally, during the few times in the opera when Onegin’s music does express genuine and deep emotion, his most dramatic thematic material seems to be derived or even directly borrowed from Tatiana’s letter-writing music. Tchaikovsky viewed Onegin as incapable of genuine feeling, and thus musically represented him, overall, as an unimaginative fop.

Although several writers and literary critics have criticized and even attacked the opera as a work of overt sentimentalism and an embarrassment to Pushkin’s novel, as we have seen, the letter scene, in Taruskin’s words, demonstrates Tchaikovsky’s “ability at once to present and to
comment, to show things as they are and at the same time to ‘distance’ the portrayal ironically.”  

In fact, “what critics . . . have failed to perceive for over a century now, was that music of a sort [Tchaikovsky] was uniquely inclined and equipped to write could perform exactly those functions for which Pushkin’s celebrated narrative voice was prized.”  

Taruskin believes that the composer imbued the opera’s music with ironies similar to those present in Pushkin’s novel. Ultimately, Tchaikovsky’s *Eugene Onegin* represents a successful work of operatic realism; it stands as “the Russian counterpart to Verdi’s *Traviata* or Massenet’s *Manon*, except that it stands higher in its national tradition than they do in theirs, and its realism more fundamentally determined its style.”  

Despite the turbulent circumstances surrounding Tchaikovsky’s life and his very personal devotion to the character of Tatiana, the resulting opera, steeped in the romantic music tradition, does not suffer from an abundance of quixotic sentimentalism. Rather, his emotional connection to the plot and desire to create a meaningful and relatable work of realism allowed him to produce an appropriately lush and intricate opera that captures the emotional journeys of multifaceted characters while also encapsulating some of the novel’s literary depth. On the other hand, Tchaikovsky’s profound sympathy for Tatiana does cause Pushkin’s story to be viewed in an entirely new light—musicologists and Russian literary scholars, including Caryl Emerson, have even argued that the opera presents the story from her viewpoint rather than from Onegin’s.  

In an essay published in 1999, Byron Nelson claimed that “*Eugene Onegin* is a great opera precisely because it replaces Pushkin’s sardonic narrator with genuine affection for the mutual incomprehension of a small circle of friends and lovers; the tenderer voices of Samuel Richardson and Romantic sensitivity displace the novel’s

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38 Ibid.
sardonic Byronism and neoclassical detachment.” While Taruskin and Nelson initially seem to make contradictory arguments, even a cursory study of the opera reveals that the opinions of both scholars are valid. Tchaikovsky’s opera, although steeped in romanticism and representative of the composer’s bond with Tatiana, still maintains some of the ironic flavor associated with Pushkin’s novel.

The Letter Scene

Tchaikovsky began composing the opera with the famous central letter scene. In this scene, which uses text verbatim from Pushkin, Tatiana pours out her feelings of naïve love in a letter to Onegin. The scene, which Taruskin describes as “in effect a string of four drawing-room romances linked by recitatives,” takes place over a period of about twelve minutes and illuminates both Tatiana’s connection to Russian domesticity and her innermost feelings of love and passion. Tatiana’s leitmotif (named not by Tchaikovsky but by later writers) and themes clearly derived from it permeate the entire opera, and it is even the first melodic line stated by the orchestra in the introduction. Tchaikovsky labels the opera’s abbreviated overture—it lasts only two and a half minutes—as an introduction. As we will see, the music of the introduction is intimately related to the most significant music in the opera. Tatiana’s leitmotif begins on the

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42 Taruskin, “Literary Folk,” 110-111. In an entry in Grove Music Online, Roger Hickman briefly explains the nineteenth-century Russian romance: “At St Petersburg, where Parisian manners were much admired, the romance was cultivated in the eighteenth century both in French comic operas and as a song type. In the nineteenth century settings of poems by Pushkin were common, and composers in the genre included Glinka. Because of the loose application of the term it is difficult to specify how many works were composed, but in general, lyricism and folk qualities were important elements. Many later Russian composers, including Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff and Shostakovich, continued to use this title. English composers, preferring ‘ode’ and ‘ballad’, rarely employed the term.” The earliest Russian romances set to music French text, but the word was soon applied to Russian songs as well. Vaguely defined as a song combining folk and art elements, the term can be used to describe a wide variety of songs and arias. See www.oxfordmusiconline.com.maurice.bgsu.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/23725?q=romance+&search=quick&pos=1&_start=1#firsthit. (Accessed 8 May 2012.)
sixth degree of the minor scale and ultimately descends to the tonic, “thus describing the interval that more than any other defines the idiom of the . . . Russian domestic or household romance of the early nineteenth century,” according to Taruskin. The motive, which harmonically moves back and forth in quick succession between the G-minor tonic and the dominant key of D major, sounds in the first violins and mimics a vocal lament (Example 1).

**Example 1** *Eugene Onegin*, Introduction, mm. 1-3

Throughout the opera, the motive’s close association with Tatiana becomes increasingly revealed and thus emphasizes her as the work’s central character.

In the letter scene, Tchaikovsky either exactly preserved Pushkin’s text or made minor additions for clarity. At the beginning of the scene, Tatiana sings words that in the novel are spoken by the narrator. In the novel, the narrator speaks these words sympathetically about Tatiana—apparently to himself—more than ten stanzas before she begins writing the letter. He writes:

Tatiana, dear Tatiana!
I now shed tears with you.
Into a fashionable tyrant’s hands
your fate already you’ve relinquished.
Dear, you shall perish; but before,
in dazzling hope,
you summon obscure bliss,
you learn the sensuousness of life

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you quaff the magic poison of desires,  
daydreams pursue you: 
you fancy everywhere  
retreats for happy trysts;  
everywhere, everywhere before you,  
is your fateful tempter.  

The letter scene opens with Tatiana singing a version of these words to herself: “May I die, but first, with dazzling hope, I call upon dark bliss, I am discovering the joy of life! I drink the magic poison of desire, I am haunted by dreams! Everywhere I look, he is in front of me, my fatal tempter! His image is all around!” Next, in a short, recitative-like section Tatiana exclaims (in words not included in the novel) “No, it’s all wrong! I will start from the beginning! . . . Oh, what’s wrong with me! I am all on fire . . . I don’t know how to start!” After the recitative, she finally sings the contents of the actual letter. For ease of discussion, both the libretto for this part of the scene and Pushkin’s actual text are included in Table 1:

<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I write to you—what would one more?</td>
<td>“I am writing to you, what else can I say?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What else is there that I could say?</td>
<td>I know that now it is in your power to punish me by your contempt!</td>
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<tr>
<td>’Tis now, I know, within your will</td>
<td>But if you have at least a drop of pity towards my unhappy lot,</td>
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<td>to punish me with scorn.</td>
<td>you will not abandon me. At first, I wanted to keep silent;</td>
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<tr>
<td>But you, for my unhappy lot</td>
<td>believe me, you would never have known my shame!”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Keeping at least one drop of pity,</td>
<td>She puts the letter aside.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you’ll not abandon me.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>At first, I wanted to be silent;</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>believe me: of my shame</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>you never would have known</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>if I had had the hope</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>even seldom, even once a week,</td>
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46 *Libretto*, 245.
47 *Libretto*, 245.
49 *Libretto*, 245-250.
to see you at our country place
only to hear your speeches,
to say a word to you, and then
to think and think about one thing,
both day and night, till a new meeting.
But, they say, you’re unsociable;
in backwoods, in the country, all bores you,
While we . . . with nothing do we glitter,
though simpleheartedly we welcome you.

Why did you visit us?
In the backwoods of a forgotten village,
I would have never known you
nor have known bitter torment.
The tumult of an inexperienced soul
having subdued with time (who knows?),
I would have found a friend after my heart,
have been a faithful wife
and a virtuous mother.

Another! . . . No, to nobody on earth
would I have given my heart away!
That has been destined in a higher council,
that is the will of heaven:  I am thine;
my entire life has been the gage
of a sure tryst with you;
I know, you’re sent to me by God,
you are my guardian to the tomb . . .
You had appeared to me in dreams,
unseen, you were already dear to me,
your wondrous glance pervaded me with languor,
your voice resounded in my soul
long since . . . No, it was not a dream!

Scarce had you entered, instantly I knew you,
I felt all faint, I felt aflame,
and in my thoughts I uttered:  It is he!
Is it not true that it was you I heard:
you in the stillness spoke to me
when I would help the poor
or assuage with a prayer
the yearning of my agitated soul?

O yes, I swore to keep in my soul
the declaration of my mad and fiery passion!
Alas, it is not in my power to control my soul!
Let it be, that which is destined to be!
I shall confess to him!  Courage!  He shall know everything!

She writes.

“Why, o why have you visited us?
In the desolation of the forgotten countryside,
I’d never have known you
and these bitter torments,
Perhaps with time, I would have pacified the commotion of my inexperienced soul, who knows?
I would have found a friend suited to my heart,
I would have been a faithful wife and a virtuous mother.

Another!  No, to nobody else in this world
would I have given my heart!
Thus it was decreed from above, that is the will of heaven:  I am yours!
My whole life was a promise of a sure meeting with you!
I know, you are sent to me by God;
until the grave you are my guardian!
You appeared to me in dreams,
yet unseen you were dear to me already,
your miraculous gaze languished me,
your voice resonated inside my soul!  For a long time…
No, that was not a dream!

As soon as you walked in, I recognized you at once, I was stupefied, I blushed,
and in my mind I said:  ‘He is the one!’
Isn’t it true that I heard you?
Was it you who spoke to me in silence, when I helped the poor,
Or by prayer sweetened the despondency of my soul?
And at this very moment
was it not you, dear vision,
that slipped through the transparent darkness,
softly bent close to my bed head?
was it not you that with [joy] and love
words of hope whispered to me?
Who are you? My guardian angel
or a perfidious tempter?

Resolve my doubts.
Perhaps, ’tis nonsense all,
an inexperienced soul’s delusion,
and some quite different thing is destined . . .

But so be it! My fate
henceforth I place into your hands,
before you I shed tears,
for your defense I plead.
Imagine: I am here alone,
none understands me,
my reason is breaking down,
and, silent, I must perish.
I’m waiting for you: with a single look
revive my heart’s hopes,
or interrupt the heavy dream
alas, with a deserved reproof!

I close! I dread to read this over.
I’m faint with shame and fear . . .
But to me your honor is a pledge,
and boldly I entrust myself to it.

She goes quickly to the table and signs the letter.

The music of the letter scene is permeated with chromaticism and melodic sixths—both characteristics associated with Tatiana’s leitmotif (see Example 1). As we will see, the theme’s connection to fate and, to a lesser extent, its musical qualities, make it in many ways reminiscent of Carmen’s fate theme. Throughout the scene, secondary themes that can be related melodically to her leitmotif are repeated throughout by a variety of instruments, creating great
orchestral color. Two of the most important themes (I will refer to them as Theme 1 and Theme 2) are clearly introduced in the orchestra as Tatiana writes the letter (before serving as accompaniment), thus establishing their significance and independence. In mm. 46-55, the oboe plays the themes independently of Tatiana (this also occurs in mm. 79-82) and then as a sort of duet with her in mm. 56-69 (and later in mm. 83-98). Example 2 shows these two regularly recurring, related themes in the piano reduction of the orchestral score:

**Example 2** *Eugene Onegin*, act 1, scene 2, Letter Scene Themes, mm. 58-63

While Theme 1 contrasts Tatiana’s leitmotif by ascending in mostly stepwise motion (with the exception of the perfect fourth leap) and essentially spelling a D-minor scale, it still, like the leitmotif, emphasizes the interval of a minor sixth. Theme 2—similar in gesture to Theme 1 and again essentially spelling the tonic scale—responds with a similar stepwise pattern that, after
being interrupted by a leap of minor seventh, descends again in stepwise motion to eventually outline a minor seventh. In mm. 72-74, time seems to be suspended as Tatiana sings a melodic line closest to her leitmotif from the opera’s introduction. The orchestra almost completely drops out as she sings the words “Alas, it is not in my power to control my soul! Let it be, that which is destined to be!” Along with the light orchestration, the sudden shift to an adagio tempo emphasizes the special moment (see Example 3).

Example 3 *Eugene Onegin*, act 1, scene 2, Statement of Tatiana’s Leitmotif, mm. 72-75

The moment, which uses text by Tchaikovsky and Shilovsky—not Pushkin—highlights Tatiana’s lack of control over her destiny. That this text is emphasized stresses fate’s vital role in the opera and hints at the disappointment looming in Tatiana’s near future. Tchaikovsky

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50 *Libretto*, 246.
creates in his opera a Tatiana who, cruelly punished by fate, still manages to survive by choosing to rise above her disappointments.

The closing section of the aria is permeated with yet another recurring motive (I will refer to it as Theme 3) that is also closely related and likely derived from Tatiana’s leitmotif. First appearing in the oboe in mm. 182-184, Tatiana herself sings Theme 3 for the first time in mm. 195-197. While the new theme initially begins on the downbeat (as seen in the second measure of Example 4), the motive is eventually displaced by an eighth rest (as seen in the sixth measure of the third system in Example 4). This rhythmic dislodgment occurs as Tatiana sings the words “Perhaps all this is trivial, an illusion of an inexperienced soul and something utterly different is predestined”), thus emphasizing the instability of her situation. The theme remains displaced until is it taken over by the trumpets in mm. 268-274.
Like Tatiana’s leitmotif, Theme 3 outlines a descending minor sixth with a repeated note in the center. The key at this moment in the scene is an unstable A-flat major, and Theme 3, which
begins on the submediant and ends on the tonic, furthers this instability through the use of unexpected accidentals. With a surprising C-flat and B-double flat present in its descent to the tonic, the theme, despite the fact that it is ultimately a simple scale pattern closely related to the tonic scale, lends a chromatic tension to Tatiana’s text. The presence of A-natural (spelled as B-double flat in the score) in the key of A-flat creates tonal anxiety and heightens of the scene’s ever present sense of insecurity. In Example 4, she sings “Who are you? Are you my guardian angel or a cunning tempter? Resolve my doubts! / Perhaps all this is trivial, an illusion of an inexperienced soul and something utterly different is predestined.” Theme 3—both noticeably related to both Tatiana’s leitmotif and linked in function to the fate motive from Carmen—(Example 5) indicates, as Tatiana sings of predestination, that Tchaikovsky meant to directly associate it with the concept of fate in the opera. That the composer adored and wished to emulate Bizet’s work makes connections between Carmen and Eugene Onegin unsurprising.

Example 5 Carmen, act 4, scene 3, Fate Theme, mm. 162-165

Theme 3, Tchaikovsky’s “fate theme,” occurs just as Tatiana realizes that she may be caught in an illusion or a dream and that something very different may actually be predestined for her.

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51 Libretto, 249.
Musically, Tchaikovsky indicates through the use of this theme that these fears are indeed grounded in something real and an unwelcome (at least initially) and ultimately inescapable fate awaits her. Theme 3 disappears as soon as Tatiana dismisses her fears—she returns to singing in a semi-declaratory fashion: “So, let it be! From now on, I entrust my destiny to you. / I shed my tears before you, I beg for your protection!”\(^5^3\) Beginning in m. 240, though (seen in Example 6 below), Tatiana again takes up the fatalistic theme (the strings support her in unison) while singing the all-important words “Imagine, I am here alone! No one understands me! / My mind is exhausted, and I must perish in silence!”\(^5^4\) As Tatiana sings that no one understands her, the theme finally returns to the downbeat (see the second system of Example 6), making her statement all the more emphatic. The theme then transfers to the trumpets, where it remains insistently on the downbeat and soars above the rest of the orchestra, effectively sealing Tatiana’s fate. As the trumpets blast the theme (beginning in measure 268), Tchaikovsky spells the second D flat as C sharp, and extreme harmonic instability is created as the remote key of A major is suddenly introduced. A-major harmonies persist (D major is also introduced, and A functions as its dominant in addition to acting as a sort of dominant to the home key of D flat) until the scene finally returns to D flat in its final measure. The persistence of Theme 3—the fate theme—and of harmonic instability emphasizes that Tatiana lacks control over her destiny. Ultimately, Tchaikovsky saw Tatiana as a person who, like himself, had been chosen by fate to live a lonely and misunderstood life outside of societal norms.

\(^5^3\) *Libretto*, 249.
\(^5^4\) Ibid.
Example 6 *Eugene Onegin*, act 1, scene 2, Letter Scene Themes, mm. 237-247

Directly following the letter scene, the nurse enters and Tatiana asks her to have the letter sent to Onegin. As Tatiana waits in agony for Onegin’s response, a chorus of peasant girls sings a folk-style song about love while picking berries in the garden (the text comes from Pushkin’s novel), thus emphasizing that everyday life must and does continue even in the midst of personal turmoil. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of Tatiana’s lovelorn letter scene with the simple song of the peasant girls creates an almost ironic atmosphere fitting for an opera setting Pushkin’s story. After Onegin enters and delivers his somewhat cold sermon, the chorus of the peasant girls begins yet again, reemphasizing the continuance of everyday activity and befitting the opera’s opening lines. Habit and routine will also save Tatiana from a completely empty and disappointing existence, as has happened before with Madame Larina and the nurse.

A stark juxtaposition between the characters of Tatiana and Onegin occurs at the end of the second act, when Onegin responds to Tatiana’s letter in person. In an aria lacking the orchestral color and memorable lyricism of Tatiana’s letter-writing music, Onegin sermonizes
patronizingly and explains that he is not meant for the bliss of marriage. He ends by warning Tatiana to “learn to control [herself]; / not everyone as I will understand you; / to trouble inexperience leads.”55 By this point in the opera, the audience cannot help but sympathize with Tatiana, while, in the novel, all of the main characters are subject to mixtures of sympathy and derision (although it must be noted that Pushkin does, in general, treat Tatiana more sympathetically than he does Onegin and especially Lensky).56 Tchaikovsky, himself an individual who lived outside of societal norms, likely found in Tatiana an equally misunderstood counterpart. Although Tatiana’s and Tchaikovsky’s supposed oddities lay in unique areas—hers in her unconventional female identity and his in his homosexuality—the composer’s deep sympathy for her remains unsurprising. In addition to feeling sympathy for Tatiana, Tchaikovsky also likely identified with her as a fellow nonconformist. That she became the focus of his opera and received its most memorable music, then, does not come as a surprise.

Onegin’s most significant musical moment—his arioso at the end of act three, scene one—occurs when he realizes, five years after spurning her, that he is deeply in love with Tatiana. Even though Tatiana is now married to a prince (as previously mentioned, the opera’s “Prince Gremin” is nameless in the novel), Onegin remains hopeful that she will “accept her fate” and leave her husband. After becoming reacquainted with Tatiana at a high social gathering, Onegin sings to himself words that combine text spoken by the narrator:

But what is happening with me? Am I in a dream?
What has moved inside my cold and lazy soul?
Is it regret, vanity or is it again, the youth’s preoccupation—love?
Alas, there is no doubt, I am in love!
I am in love like a boy, full of youthful passion.

56 In Pushkin’s novel, Onegin, though sympathized with, is ultimately the victim of cruel irony and Lensky is consistently mocked. Tatiana, despite the fact that she is a romantic dreamer like Lensky, is treated with a measure of respect from the narrator. As the novel’s ultimately wisest character, she earns the narrator’s admiration through her acceptance of reality and through her great morality.
May I die, but first, with dazzling hope,
I will taste the enchanted poison of desire.
I will revel in an unattainable dream!
Wherever I look, her dear desired image is before me!  

While it has been suggested by critics that Onegin’s love is artificial and based solely on the fact that Tatiana had become a desirable member of high society, Tchaikovsky here allows the lovesick character a moment of possible genuineness. Significantly, the arioso’s tune is completely derived from the opening melody of Tatiana’s letter scene—music that the character of Onegin has not heard, thus indicating the potential sincerity of Onegin’s love. The following excerpts from Tatiana’s melody and Onegin’s arioso (Examples 7.1 and 7.2, respectively) demonstrate the similarities between the opening segment of the letter scene and Onegin’s lovesick tune.

Originally associated with Tatiana’s naïve love for Onegin, the melody’s straightforward yet memorable lyricism indicates the simultaneous simplicity and sincerity of the character’s newly discovered emotion. Because Onegin had not heard Tatiana’s love tune, his appropriation of it likely demonstrates the sincerity of his love. On the other hand, that the audience is privy to the tune’s lack of originality may indicate that, in giving Onegin this tune, Tchaikovsky is demonstrating his low opinion of the character (whom he viewed as unimaginative). With only slight, superficial rhythmic differences in the opening and closing measures of the melody, Onegin sings exactly Tatiana’s melody:

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57 *Libretto*, 290-291. The narrator speaks similar words in the twenty-first stanza of Chapter Eight, lines 10-14: "What ails him? What a strange daze he is in! / What has stirred at the bottom of a soul cold and sluggish? / Vexation? Vanity? Or once again / youth’s worry—love?” The remainder of Onegin’s arioso text comes from the fifteenth stanza of Chapter Three, in which the narrator discusses Tatiana’s predicament (lines 5-14): “Dear, you shall perish; but before, / in dazzling hope, / you summon obscure bliss, / you learn the sensuousness of life, / you quaff the magic poison of desires, / daydreams pursue you: / you fancy everywhere retreats for happy trysts: / everywhere, everywhere before you, / is your fateful tempter.”

58 In the following scene, Tatiana herself doubts the sincerity of Onegin’s love: “Why am I marked by you? Is it because I must now appear in the highest society; / because I am rich and distinguished; / because my husband was wounded on the battlefield, and for that reason we enjoy the favor of court? / Is it because my disgrace can now be noticed by everyone, / and in the high society can bring you an alluring honor?” See *Libretto*, 293.
Example 7.1 *Eugene Onegin*, act 1, Letter Scene, mm. 14-23
Example 7.2 *Eugene Onegin* act 3, Onegin’s Arioso, mm. 55-65
Furthermore, some of Onegin’s words echo those sung by Tatiana just before she began writing her letter—“I drink the enchanted poison of desire, I am haunted by dreams! Everywhere I look, he is in front of me, my fatal tempter! His image is all around!” (Again, this text is actually spoken by the narrator in the novel.)\(^59\) To Tchaikovsky, then, Onegin does not deserve sympathy (and he does not receive it) until he transforms from a cold Byronic hero into a lovesick would-be poet who fully accepts and expresses his newly discovered range of tumultuous emotion—in essence, Tchaikovsky does not treat him kindly until he takes on characteristics previously associated with Tatiana and the poet Lensky.

In the opera’s final scene, in which Onegin directly confronts Tatiana and insists that she leave her husband for him, Tatiana, and not Onegin, takes the center stage. As in the novel, she delivers her own sermon (reminiscent of Onegin’s) in which she remembers Onegin’s initial rejection of her and asks him if he is only attracted to her now because of her new social status. Even though Tatiana ultimately admits that she still loves Onegin, she refuses to end her marriage and eventually leaves the room after bidding him a final goodbye (in the novel she makes no such dramatic statement, but rather leaves after explaining that she must remain faithful to her husband). After Tatiana delivers her sermon-like speech, Onegin desperately pleads with her, and insists that, in words taken almost exactly from Tatiana’s letter, “Your whole life was a sure promise of union with me! And know, to you I am sent by God, til the grave I am your guardian!”\(^60\) In the novel, Onegin remains silent during the entirety of Tatiana’s sermon, and she leaves the room before he is given a chance to respond. Tchaikovsky and Shilovsky’s libretto, on the other hand, allows him to interject desperate pleas made up of text derived largely from an unanswered letter he writes to Tatiana in the novel. As mentioned

\(^{59}\) *Libretto*, 245. In the novel, the narrator speaks similar words on behalf of Tatiana in the fifteenth stanza of chapter three.

\(^{60}\) *Libretto*, 297.
above, he also sings words taken almost directly from Tatiana’s letter, which can be viewed as either demonstrating the authenticity of his affection (because he is taking on the words of a completely genuine character) or as demonstrating its artificiality (because the words are unoriginal). While Pushkin leaves the reader with a silent “thunderstruck” Onegin, Tchaikovsky in closing presents a mortified Onegin who dramatically and pitifully sings the resigned words “O shame! O gloom! O my pitiful lot!” Even though the audience cannot help but feel sympathy toward Onegin at this point in the opera (Tchaikovsky emphasizes Onegin’s pitiful state by allowing him the opera’s final words), it is still Tatiana who dominates, musically and textually, in the finale.

A tower of moral strength, Tatiana is immediately established as the more powerful figure in the scene. Onegin, desperate but hopeful, enters the stage madly and rushes to Tatiana, where, as in the novel, he falls at her feet in despair. Tatiana delivers her text with clarity and strength, while Onegin’s frantic, interspersed pleas with her indicate his turmoil. He responds to Tatiana’s composed speech with the increasingly desperate text

Ah! Oh, God! Can it be that in my humble entreaty, your cold glance will see the ruses of contemptible guile? I am tormented by your reproach! If only you knew, how terrible it is to be anguished by the thirst for love, to burn with passion and to force the mind to suppress the excitement of the blood, to desire to embrace your knees, and, weeping at your feet, to pour out prayers, confessions, penance, all, all that I could express!  

All of Onegin’s entreaties are accompanied by gradual increases in speed, while Tatiana’s grounded responses all initially return to a slower and steadier tempo. Additionally, melodic lines associated with the letter scene, fate, and Tatiana dominate the finale, simultaneously

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61 Libretto, 299. Pushkin, Onegin, VIII.48.2.
62 Libretto, 296.
furthering Tchaikovsky’s heroine as the opera’s more powerful character and reminding
audiences of fate’s role in his version of Pushkin’s tale.

Pushkin’s Novel and Tchaikovsky’s Opera: Varying Views and Conclusions

A body of scholarship encompassing a wide variety of opinions regarding the relationship
between Tchaikovsky’s opera and Pushkin’s novel has appeared over the past quarter century.
While Taruskin, in a chapter from his 2009 book *On Russian Music*, argues that the music in
Tchaikovsky’s opera clearly takes on the role of the narrator from the novel (this point will be
revisited in a moment), other scholars present as a focal point in their discussions the
discrepancies between the two works. Rather than declaring these discrepancies as shameful to
the opera, as the literary figures Turgenev and Nabokov did, however, scholars explain the
disparities as means for understanding the culturally and personally unique situations
surrounding the creations of the two works. For example, in 1999, both Truman Bullard and
Byron Nelson wrote about Tchaikovsky’s opera not as an embarrassment to Pushkin’s novel, but
as a work that the composer made very much his own. Both scholars described the opera as
deeply connected to Tchaikovsky’s life circumstances and as largely indebted to his appreciation
of *Carmen*. In a chapter of a more recent book by Boris Gasparov and in his chapter in the 2006
*Cambridge Companion to Pushkin*, the controversial relationship between the novel and the
opera is discussed as a way of discovering details about the different cultural surroundings and
personal viewpoints and goals of the author and the composer, rather than as a means for
shallowly contrasting the two inevitably unique works. 63 On the other hand, it should be pointed
out that this scholarship—with the exception of Taruskin’s—firmly recognizes that the opera’s

63 Boris Gasparov, “Eugene Onegin in the Age of Realism,” in *Five Operas and a Symphony: Word and
reflection of Tchaikovsky’s personal life and late nineteenth-century European culture indeed creates significant discrepancies between it and Pushkin’s novel. Despite this acknowledgement, though, these scholars refuse to argue that the disparity between the two works compromises the opera’s quality; rather, they understand that the opera and the novel stem from two separate traditions and judge Tchaikovsky’s *Eugene Onegin* with a set of musical criteria.

In her 1998 chapter, “Tchaikovsky’s Tatiana,” Russian literature scholar Caryl Emerson opens by asserting that “Tchaikovsky’s *Eugene Onegin* has often been accused of betraying its literary source—yet the charge is baffling. Operatic transposition always demands adjustments.”64 Emerson continues by explaining that the opera’s libretto in no way jeopardizes the novel, and explains that Tchaikovsky even “scrupulously preserved the poet’s lines in all episodes of high emotional intensity.”65 The most significant liberty Tchaikovsky took when transforming the novel into a musical medium, Emerson explains, lies in the composer’s treatment of the novel’s heroine. Emerson points out that, in the novel, Tatiana remains largely “[detached] from her surroundings” and silent.66 Protected by the narrator, she “reads, thinks, stores up impressions, passively waits; but except for the rash act of that one letter, she does not act.”67 In Tchaikovsky’s opera, Tatiana, although still an introvert, comes to life in new ways. Her inner and outer worlds are expressed through her text and most importantly through her music. Instead of arguing the novel’s narrator exists in Tchaikovsky’s score, as Taruskin does, Emerson writes that the composer, “usurping the function of Pushkin’s narrator with subtlety and enormous persistence, slowly reveals her inner self to us.”68 Although Emerson correctly

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64 Emerson, “Tatiana,” 216.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
observes that Tatiana becomes central and more active in the opera, her claim that Tchaikovsky “usurped” the novel’s narrator in his treatment of the heroine invites controversy.

In a recent essay, Richard Taruskin wrote the following in response to the claim that Tchaikovsky’s opera lacked the irony of the novel and embraced sentimentality: “The music, quite simply, is the narrator. . . . Using a different medium, and of course adopting music-specific strategies, he manages to invest the opera with the same multileveled perspective—the same ironies and knowing asides—that Pushkin achieved through the more predictable use of words alone.”

Unlike Emerson, then, Taruskin firmly believes that, rather than usurping Pushkin’s narrator, he creates its musical equivalent. As proof for his argument, Taruskin cites Tchaikovsky’s use of traditional forms—musical codes—to both place the opera in the appropriate time period and to express the story’s layered meanings. For instance, he claims that the extensive use of sixths in the opera’s melodic material and leitmotifs “[describes] the interval that more than any other defines the idiom of the . . . Russian domestic or household romance of the early nineteenth century.” Other examples include the use of four romances in the letter scene and the traditional dance music in the ballroom scene. Tchaikovsky’s ironic approach, according to Taruskin, lies in “his ability at once to present and to comment, to show things as they are and at the same time to ‘distance’ the portrayal ironically.” As an example, Taruskin cites the initial entrance of Onegin and Lensky in act one: “The comically exaggerated courtly flourishes in the orchestra that accompany their bows to the Larin ladies instantly sketch their foppish history, accomplishing much of the work of Pushkin’s Chapter One,” a chapter that Tchaikovsky and Shilovsky did not actually include in the opera’s libretto. Another significant

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70 Taruskin, “Literary Folk,” 110.
71 Ibid.
72 Ibid.
moment (not mentioned by Taruskin) that demonstrates the composer’s musical wit occurs in the first scene of the opera’s final act. In 1885, Tchaikovsky edited the scene in order to incorporate an écossaise that not only adds coherence to the scene—it appears twice, once toward the beginning and again at the very end—but also adds ironic flavor. Directly after Onegin realizes his love for Tatiana in his impassioned (although musically borrowed) arioso, the orchestra bursts into a lively écossaise (see Example 8). While the scene’s original ending—a series of expectedly dramatic minor chords—served the opera adequately, the new, lighthearted conclusion mocks Onegin’s serious and theatrical realization. In essence, Tchaikovsky chooses to at once ignore and trivialize the hero’s passionate, newly discovered love (the composer responds to Onegin’s love much the way Onegin responds to Tatiana’s in the first act). While this musical mockery may be viewed as a way in which Tchaikovsky captured Pushkin’s irony, it can just as easily be understood as a clear representation of the composer’s personal views of the story’s characters. After all, Tchaikovsky’s letters (and the opera) make clear his disgust for Onegin and admiration for Tatiana. The most informed interpretation of this compositional act, then, is that it demonstrates both Tchaikovsky’s awareness and inclusion of Pushkin’s irony and his personal connection to the novel’s characters. Additionally, the insertion of the écossaise again emphasizes the idea of the continuance of everyday activity and routine even in the face of hardship (habit becomes humanity’s savior), a theme consistently present in the opera.

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73 An écossaise is a lively contredanse in duple meter that was popular throughout Europe during the early part of the nineteenth century.
Example 8 *Eugene Onegin* act 3, Écossaise II excerpt, mm. 33-59
CONCLUSION

Tchaikovsky chose to transform Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* into an opera not only because of its uniquely poetic language, but also (and first and foremost) because he felt a deeply individual bond with the novel’s plot and with its characters. More than anything else, his opera reflects his emotional responses to and connections with Tatiana, whom he adored, and Onegin, whom he disdained but feared he once emulated. While Onegin is the hero of Pushkin’s novel, Tatiana takes center stage in the opera. Additionally, the sentimental poet Lensky, although mocked cruelly in the novel, is treated with extreme reverence in the opera, and even sings one of the work’s most memorable arias. Furthermore, the opera celebrates rather than derides emotionalism and fervent love, and, as pointed out earlier, the scenes during which Onegin finally finds himself capable of deep feeling stand as his most musically sympathetic moments. The concept of cruel, inescapable fate—present in the novel but only taken semi-seriously—permeates Tchaikovsky’s opera and is surely related to the composer’s passion for *Carmen* and his own turbulent circumstances. In creating his novel, Pushkin had very different goals than Tchaikovsky—namely, creating a groundbreaking work that would successfully merge literary genres and that would stand as a multifaceted response to the work of Byron. Tchaikovsky, on the other hand, sought to produce an intimate work of operatic realism that, centered on the journeys of its characters, would speak to the hearts of its audience.

Even though Tchaikovsky’s *Eugene Onegin* surely demonstrates the composer’s personal connection to and opinion of Pushkin’s characters, careful study of the opera makes it clear that the work also reveals the composer’s awareness of the novel’s irony. It becomes evident upon studying the opera that the ironic flavor of Pushkin’s novel exists clearly in certain places of the musical work (during the écossaise in the final act, for instance). While some of these musically
and textually ironic moments may reflect Tchaikovsky’s dislike for Onegin more than his conscious transfer of Pushkin’s irony, the opera’s overall tone indicates that the composer’s musical choices likely reflect his desire to capture the novel’s satirical tone. In the end, Pushkin’s novel and Tchaikovsky’s opera stem from two very different times and are the products of two singular life experiences and must necessarily represent the individual biases of their creators. Additionally, as two different mediums, the novel and opera belong to separate artistic traditions and exist first and foremost as members of the literary canon and the operatic canon, respectively. Ultimately, then, Pushkin’s novel and Tchaikovsky’s opera represent multifaceted and personal creations that stand as the results of unique circumstances and perspectives. The opera *Eugene Onegin* presents a unique fusion of music and literature that captures moments of the novel’s irony and simultaneously imbues Pushkin’s story with the unique color, beauty, and sincerity associated with Tchaikovsky’s romantic style.
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