



Love in Transition: Emotional Conflicts and Cognitive Dislocations in Onegin's Romantic Experience

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Abstract. In his work *Eugene Onegin*, Pushkin, with his exquisite poetic touch, profoundly created the typical "superfluous man" image of Onegin, and delicately outlined his spiritual struggles in the inner world and his love tragedy. The intricate love trajectory between Onegin and Tatyana has experienced two profound "emotional mismatches". This is not only a profound exploration of the individual's emotional fate, but also a poignant depiction of the helpless ending of love amidst the intertwining of human contradictions and moral shackles. This article aims to, through a meticulous analysis of the love journey between Onegin and Tatyana, deeply interpret the "Russian melancholy" that Onegin suffers from, that is, the profound loneliness and confusion generated by the intense collision between personal ideals and social reality in the torrent of historical change. At the same time, this article will also explore the driving force of desire hidden behind this tragedy, revealing the deeper social, cultural, and psychological meanings carried by the individual's emotional tragedy against the backdrop of the drastic transformation of Russian society, so as to comprehensively understand and interpret the far-reaching influence and universal value of this classic love story.

keywords: Eugene Onegin; 19th-century Russian literature; affective contradiction

1 Introduction

"Eugene Onegin" is a novel in verse penned by Alexander Pushkin, chronicling the tragic love of the aristocratic youth, Onegin. Through its elegant rhymes and profound themes, the work critically reflects societal issues prevalent in early 19th-century Russia. The character of Onegin embodies the complexities of the era's nobility, influenced by progressive ideals yet in a state of inherent contradiction. The narrative skillfully blends the lyrical intensity characteristic of poetry, delving into the characters' thoughts and emotions, with a panoramic depiction of Russian social life.

The works of Pushkin are closely intertwined with socio-political realities, narrating love tragedy in the background of high society, rural life, and travel. Through the character of Onegin, the author created a complex image. Onegin, portrayed as aloof,

indifferent, and contradictory, yet harboring profound thoughts and intense emotions, embodies the quintessential youth of Russia during a period of societal transformation.

The female protagonist, Tatyana, is not only beautiful, pure, intelligent, and imaginative but also deeply rooted in her national identity. Her name, one of the most popular at the time, symbolizes Russian national character. She is thoughtful, courageous in expressing her love, and capable of self-determination, choosing her own marital destiny. Ultimately, she demonstrates rational thought and adherence to moral and social norms when confronted with the object of her youthful affection. Her adherence to traditional Russian moral and ethical concepts and the construction of her own ethical norms are ethical interpretations of Russian women's self-respect, self-love, self-discipline, and sanity, and can be considered a model for modern married women to follow.[1](Zhang, 2023) Furthermore, the characters of Lensky and Tatyana are also highly distinctive. The contrasting characteristics and interwoven fates of these four individuals collectively constitute this profound love tragedy.

2 Love as a "Lens": Examining Deeper Meanings from the Surface of Love

Structuralist literary theory posits that the *surface structure* is directly observable, while the *deep structure* represents the intrinsic connections of things, accessible only through a specific cognitive model. [2](Zhu, 2014) In literary works, the surface structure refers to the diachronic narrative, i.e., the development of an event; the deep structure refers to the synchronic connotations: cultural meanings and social psychology, including moral and philosophical perspectives. The primary narrative content of the entire work—the tragic love story of Onegin and Tatiana—is not complex, but from the perspective of structuralist literary theory, one can understand its rich implications.

“This tragedy of misplaced love” is subject to varied interpretations, as seen through the perspectives of Tatyana, Onegin, and the narrator. Tatyana and Onegin's affections for each other develop at different stages. Tatyana, in her adolescence, embodies the purest form of love, expressing her feelings with utmost sincerity, meticulously penning her emotions and confiding in her nurse. Within the framework of enduring cultural norms and rational thought, a dichotomy exists between the sexes, with one taking the initiative and the other assuming a passive role, the latter typically being the female. [3](Beauvoir, 1998).

Tatyana's actions represent a triumph of intense emotion over reason. The young woman's choice to express herself irrationally stems from her profound love, a sentiment both pure and genuine. From Pushkin's writings and personal experiences, it is evident that he celebrates moments when emotion surpasses reason. Tatyana's courage in acknowledging and expressing her feelings during her youth reflects a degree of modern consciousness.

Upon receiving Tatiana's declaration of love, Onegin, in a state of spiritual emptiness, sought a "radiant object" and thus ventured to the countryside, ostensibly to initiate reforms. However, when Tatiana's pure affection was offered to him, he responded with a facade of moral rectitude, rejecting her. The rationale behind his re-

jection is a subject of considerable debate, with one key aspect being his rational contemplation of marriage and love. He was unwilling to "bind life with the chains of matrimony" and pitied "the poor woman, alone in her empty chamber, consumed by sorrow, grieving for an unsuitable husband."

The "dislocation" evident here underscores the divergence in the characters' psychological states and temperamental attributes. From a perspective of deep structure, this exemplifies the disparate choices humanity makes when confronted with the interplay of reason and emotion, love and ethical constraints.

The second "misalignment" occurs when Onegin expresses ardent affection for Tatiana, now a married woman. Having experienced Lensky's demise and undertaken extensive travels, Onegin confronts the same individual, yet now bound by moral constraints, and is nonetheless consumed by a passionate love for Tatiana. He, who once spurned Tatiana's affections with emotional detachment, now finds himself passionately and desperately in love with her. He seeks to anchor his spiritual being to this resplendent woman, yearning to rediscover his connection to society and the meaning of his existence through this former acquaintance.

But at this time, Onegin's pursuit of the meaning of love and the search for the value of existence are detached from reality and contrary to morality, and he still has not learned to be faithful to love. While Tatiana, revisiting the emotional landscape of her youth, finds herself in a state of moral quandary, she ultimately upholds her commitment to the marital contract, adhering to the moral imperative of wifely devotion. This fidelity to marriage is not a social precept but her own choice, reflecting her pursuit of high moral character. As Pushkin's idealized representation of the "Russian woman's soul," Tatiana encapsulates the author's feminine consciousness and moral philosophy: the courage to defy convention in the pursuit of love, coupled with an unwavering adherence to tradition and acceptance of her present circumstances within the institution of marriage.

The dramatic conflict and nuanced emotions inherent in the two instances of romantic misplacement within *Eugene Onegin* have served as a wellspring of inspiration for various artistic adaptations. Tchaikovsky's operatic rendition and subsequent ballet productions stand as testaments to the work's enduring appeal. The development of national music in Russia was shaped by the influence of Russian literature. [4](Wang, 2022) The opera and ballet's global acclaim is attributable to the source material's profound emotional resonance and thematic depth, skillfully realized through distinctive creative interpretations.

3 An Analysis of Onegin's Melancholic Disposition

The text dedicates considerable attention to delineating Onegin's melancholic, aloof, and internally conflicted character. Feelings of emptiness, suffering, and discontent persistently accompany him, proving difficult to dispel. The "melancholic character" here is typical of Onegin as a "superfluous man".

The opening of the work delineates Onegin's formative years, with particular emphasis on his educational experiences. Tutored from a young age by a French

précepteur, he demonstrates a good command of the French language, despite a superficial engagement with his studies. Possessing a dilettantish grasp of various subjects, he nonetheless exhibits a talent for producing epigrammatic pronouncements. His interest in literature and history is perfunctory, contrasting with his keen engagement with the capitalist economic theories of Adam Smith. This suggests a dissatisfaction with the "old," with the "dreams of the old" manifesting themselves through the guise of the "new." His intellectual pursuits fail to alleviate his spiritual ennui, instead exacerbating his pre-existing melancholic state.

As a member of the aristocracy, Onegin once embodied the archetype of the "dandy." His disposition was not inherently averse to social interaction; rather, he demonstrated a marked aptitude for navigating the intricacies of high society. "He was quite adept at employing tenderness and..."

Certain scholars posit that Onegin's rejection of Tatiana lacks a clear rationale, yet his ultimate refusal may be attributed to a psychological malady—melancholy. Although there are references to Onegin's "*Russian Soul*."

*We still, alas, cannot forestall it—
This dreadful ailment's heavy toll;
The spleen is what the English call it,
We call it simply Russian soul.
'Twas this our hero had contracted;
And though, thank God, he never acted
To put a bullet through his head,
His former love of life was dead.
Like Byron's Harold, lost in trances,
Through drawing rooms he'd pass and stare;
But neither whist, nor gossip there,
Nor wanton sighs, nor tender glances—
No, nothing touched his sombre heart,
He noticed nothing, took no part.* [5](Pushkin, 1831)

At this time, Onegin is ensnared by ennui. During Pushkin's era, the burgeoning field of psychology had yet to significantly intersect with literary discourse. Nevertheless, literature possessed a longstanding tradition of employing illness as a metaphor for specific conditions. Susan Sontag, in **Illness as Metaphor**, observes that tuberculosis is frequently conceived as a malady of impoverishment and deprivation... Marguerite Gautier, the tubercular protagonist of **La Dame aux Camélias**, though immersed in opulence, experiences a strong sense of alienation... The Romantic movement, in a novel manner, imbued death from tuberculosis with moral significance.[6](Sontag, 1978) Pushkin's depiction of Onegin's melancholic state serves to illuminate the intricate psychological and metaphorical dimensions underpinning his character. Onegin, at his core, is inherently kind, notwithstanding his social adeptness and libertine tendencies. Yet, he is bereft of the capacity to love and be loved. This melancholia transcends the confines of individual amorous experience, ascending from personal contradictions to embody the spirit of the age.

Pushkin used a *first-person perspective* to elucidate Onegin's psychological state and internal conflicts. The primary focus is not on depicting his "illness" but rather on

interpreting the metaphorical significance underlying this condition. This approach illuminates his existential crisis and his quest for self-meaning. Existentialism, which posits that existence precedes essence, is reflected in Onegin's bewilderment in matters of love, thereby illustrating his exploration and pursuit of the meaning of his own existence.

Onegin is thus entrapped within an existential quandary. In his daily life, he experiences both anxiety and suffering due to his parasitic existence. Simultaneously, he lacks the capacity and courage to transcend his circumstances and become a "fighter" or "hero," instead being compelled to subsist in a state of idleness and bewilderment.[7](Song & Wang, 2021) . Consequently, he develops an aversion to his past "loves" and perceives the significance of love and marriage as fundamentally nihilistic. Therefore, upon reading Tatyana's sincere letter to him, he chooses to evade through rejection.

One observes this in his rejection of Tatyana's declaration, where, following his acknowledgment of her sincerity, he pivots the discourse towards the institution of marriage. He articulates his skepticism and disillusionment with matrimony, declining her proposal under the pretense of sparing her the anguish of a loveless union and the sorrow of a mismatched partnership. A close reading of his refusal reveals a veneer of moralistic restraint, yet it simultaneously serves as a vehicle for expressing his internal conflicts.

Within Onegin's melancholic disposition, the element of desire emerges as a crucial factor. The protagonist's ennui stems not only from his rejection and skepticism towards his former life and values but also from the void created by the absence of avenues for fulfillment. This encompasses a yearning for sensory gratification and social validation, which, while Onegin despises the superficiality of high society, he remains ensnared by these very desires.

Pushkin's portrayal of Onegin as a "*superfluous man*" characterized by his melancholic tendencies, serves to illuminate his psychological predicament: a struggle for liberation within the constraints of societal realities and institutions, akin to an existential crisis. After Pushkin, Russian writers such as Lermontov, Turgenev, Goncharov and others followed Pushkin's tradition and created a series of images of "redundant people". [8](Wu, 2019)

Drawing upon Engels' definition of tragedy as the "necessary demand of history and the impossibility of its fulfillment," Onegin, as the protagonist of a tragic love narrative, embodies a "threnodic hero." He possesses a noble aspect, distancing himself from aristocratic life in pursuit of his ideals, yet he is also marked by character flaws, such as an inability to govern his desires. Driven by vanity, he engages in a duel, ultimately failing to reconcile with societal norms and traditions, unlike Tatyana.

4 Conclusions

Onegin's emotional desires reflected the social conflicts in Russia at that time. In the process of conflict between the capitalist civilization and the feudal system, the advanced-minded aristocrats belonged to the upper class but received Western education.

Their mental attitude was incompatible with the social status quo of Russia at that time, but due to cultural differences and isolation, they could not participate in the transformation of the society well.

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