EVGENY ONEGIN

Evgeny Onegin is a novel in verse written by the Russian Alexander Pushkin. It is a classic of Russian literature and was published in serial form between 1825 and 1832. The first complete edition was published in 1833 and our edition is number 114 of a limited edition of 750 copies published by Pushkin Press in London in 1937.

STORY LINE

Eugene Onegin, a Russian dandy who is bored with life, inherits a country mansion from his uncle. He befriends a poet Vladimir Lensky who introduces him to Tatiana who immediately falls in love with him. That very night, Tatiana writes a letter to Onegin to tell him she loves him. In those days, it was definitely considered inappropriate for a young unmarried girl to declare her undying love to a young man. He, in any event, does not even reply. The two meet again, but he rejects her tactfully but in a condescending manner.

Due to the fact that Onegin flirts with his friend Lensky’s fiancée at a grand ball, Lensky challenges Onegin to fight a duel. Duels were forbidden in the Russian Empire. Onegin kills Lensky and flees the countryside.

Tatiana and Onegin meets again after a few years. She has matured to a greater degree than he has and Onegin falls in love with her. She however, rejects him and stays faithful to her husband.

The entire work is written in verses of iambic tetrameter with the unusual rhyme scheme “AbAbCCdEffEgg” where the uppercase letters represent feminine rhymes while the lowercase letters represent masculine rhymes. This form has come to be known as the ‘Pushkin sonnet’.

THE AUTHOR

Alexander Sergeyevich Pushkin (1799-1837) was a Russian author of the Romantic era and is considered to be the greatest Russian poet and founder of modern Russian literature. It is ironic that Pushkin died after he challenged his wife, Natalya Goncharova’s, alleged lover to a duel in which he was mortally wounded.

OPERATICAL ADAPTATIONS

The story became quite famous because various adaptations in different media were produced. An opera, based on the book, was composed by Tchaikovsky in 1879. The opera was staged many times all over the world.

The opera was first performed in Moscow in 1879, the year that Tchaikovsky composed it. The production at the Opera House in Kiev (shown below) proved to be quite traumatic.

In February 1896, after the morning performance of the opera Eugene Onegin, one of the make-up rooms caught fire. The fire spread instantly, and within hours the stately structure of the City theatre constructed in 1856, was totally destroyed. Rebuilding started immediately and the new splendid opera house as shown below was completed in 1901.


A more modern production of the opera was staged in 2007 at the New York Metropolitan Opera.
Renée Fleming as Tatiana at the Metropolitan Opera in 2007.
(http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/12/arts/music/12oneg.html)

Renee Fleming as Tatiana, and Dmitri Hvorostovsky as Onegin at the Metropolitan Opera in 2007.
The opera was also produced in Hampstead in London. Please note the catchy words on the poster: “The emotions are raw, the passion unbridled, the music sublime”!

The music composed by Tchaikovsky is also available on CD.

BALLET

John Cranko choreographed a three-act ballet of Eugene Onegin using Tchaikovsky’s music. It is very interesting that Cranko (1927-1973), who was a choreographer with the Sadler’s Wells Ballet which later became the Royal Ballet in London, was born in Rustenburg in South Africa. He received his early ballet training in Cape Town under the leading South African ballet teacher and director, Dulcie Howes of the University of Cape Town Ballet School. He then moved to London.
FILM

Two films were produced on Eugene Onegin. The 1988 version is a stunning visual presentation of the opera and was directed by Peter Wiegl.

The 1999 film, as shown below, is an English adaptation of Pushkin’s work. The film was shot in the United Kingdom and was directed by Martha Fiennes. The male role was played by her brother Ralph Fiennes, and Tatyana was played by Liv Tyler.

TRANSLATIONS

There are a number of translations of the Russian work in English. The translations caused quite some upheaval and debate. The translation considered the best by some was done by Walter W. Arndt in 1963. He kept strictly to the rhyme scheme of the Onegin Stanza and won the Bollingen Prize for this translation. Vladimir Nabokov, a multi-lingual Russian-American novelist, criticized this strict translation and wrote a more melodious and free version of Eugene Onegin. Many other translations of the work were also done amidst continuous scholarly discourse and debate. Nabokov wrote a poem on translating Pushkin:

What is translation? On a platter
A poet’s pale and glaring head,
A Parrot’s screech, a monkey’s chatter,
And profanation of the dead.
The parasites you were so hard on
Are pardoned if I have your pardon,
O, Pushkin, for my stratagem:
I traveled down your secret stem,
And reached the root, and fed upon it;
Then, in a language newly learned,
I grew another stalk and turned
Your stanza patterned on a sonnet,
Into my honest roadside prose –
All thorn, but cousin to your rose.

Reflected words can only shiver
Like elongated lights that twist
In the black mirror of a river
Between the city and the mist.
Elusive Pushkin? Persevering,
I still pick up Tatiana’s earring,
Still travel with your sullen rake.
I find another man’s mistake,
I analyze alliterations
That grace your feast and haunt the great
Fourth stanza of your Canto Eight.
This is my task – a poet’s patience
and scholastic passion blent:
Dove-droppings on your monument.

--Vladimir Nabokov
http://www.tetrameter.com/nabokov.htm

Pushkin wrote a book in Russian verse that had a huge impact on many playing fields – literature, opera, classical music, ballet and film. Pick your choice and enjoy!

Available at Rare Books - Doornfontein Campus
Enkele gdichten by Alexander Poesjin; uit het Russisch vertaal door Aleida G. Schol. Printed in 1944.
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