



# ALEXANDER SERGEYEVICH PUSHKIN

Readings in Russian Literature: The Nineteenth Century  
IIIT Hyderabad  
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# A.S. Pushkin (1799-1837)

- Not only believed to be the greatest Russian poet, but also the founder of modern Russian prose.
- Father belonged to Russia's old nobility, going back to the 12th century
- On his mother's side, descended from a freed African slave and Scandinavian and German nobility
  - Very proud of African heritage and represents it in his work
- Also proud of a family history of political protest:
  - one ancestor was executed by Peter I for opposing his westernizing reforms, and another jailed by Catherine II for protesting against her coup d'etat

Портрет Александра Пушкина  
*Portrait of A.S. Pushkin (1827)*  
Orest Kiprensky  
Oil on Canvas  
Tretyakov Gallery



# A.S. Pushkin (1799-1837)

- Starts writing in French (first language), then Russian, at the age of fourteen → immediate recognition
- Nominal post in government service
- “Ode to Liberty” (1817)
- (Relatively liberal) Alexander I exiles him
- Exile and house arrest suit him, writes furiously
- Listens to fairytales told by a serf, his former nanny, Arina Rodionovna
  - He keeps notes and composes them as poems a few years later
  - Collects her sayings and expressions

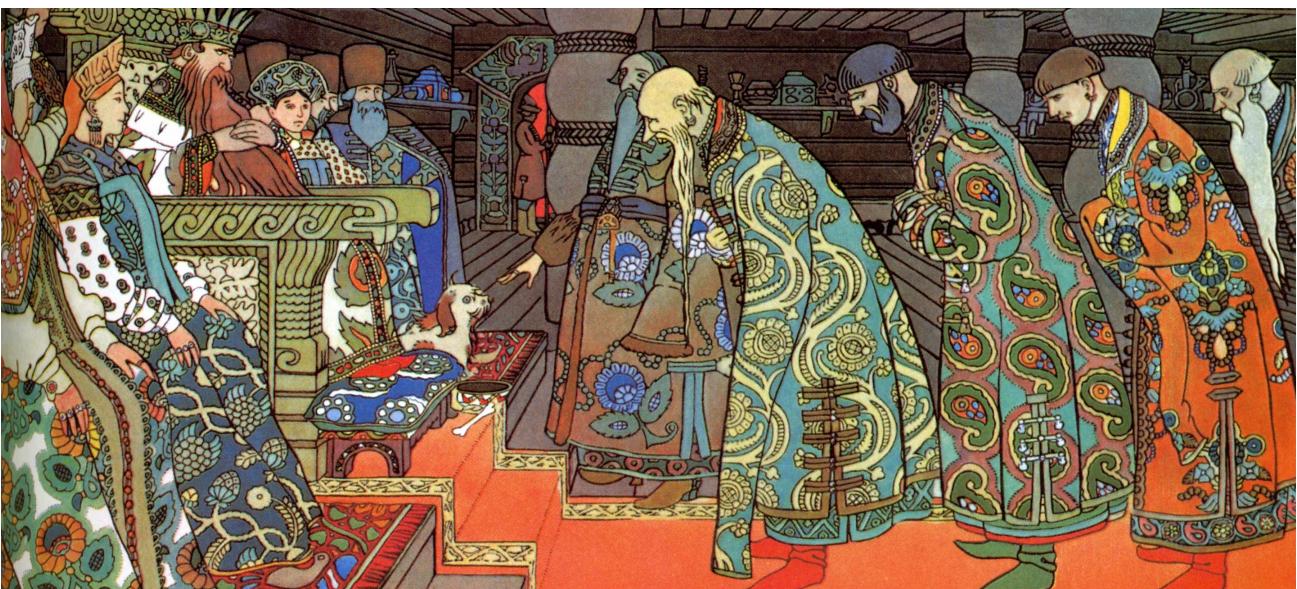
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# A.S. Pushkin (1799-1837)

- People laughed at him because they thought folktales were “fit only for peasant consumption” (Bartlett 98).
- But Pushkin had recognized the enormous potential of fairy-tales for the creation of a truly national culture.
- This changed with Aleksandr Afanasiev's collection of 640 folk tales and folklore (1850s-1870s) from all over Russia. These tales had a huge influence on all kinds of artists.

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L to R: "Сказка о мертвой царевне и семи богатырях" ("The Dead Princess and the Seven Knights"; 1889), illustrated by Mikhail Nesterov; "The Golden Cockerel" (1907) and "The Tale of Tsar Saltan" (c.1925), both illustrated by Ivan Bilibin;

# A.S. Pushkin (1799-1837)



Eugene Onegin and Vladimir Lensky's Duel (1899)  
Ilya Repin

Watercolour, white lead, and India ink on paper  
Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts

- Marries Natalya Goncharova, who accepts him the second time he asks, in 1831.
- Dies in a duel, having challenged a friend of the man who was alleged to be his wife's lover
  - *Barrier Duel*
- Mikhail Lermontov court-martialled for writing a poem criticising a society that allowed this to happen.
- Pushkin Statue unveiled in Moscow in 1880 by public subscription. Festivities last for three days, Dostoevsky and Turgenev speak.

# Epigraph 1

“Пиковая дама означает тайную недоброжелательность.  
Новейшая гадательная книга.”

“А в ненастные дни  
Собирались они  
Часто;  
Гнули -- бог их прости! --  
От пятидесяти  
На сто,  
И выигрывали,  
И отписывали  
Мелом.  
Так, в ненастные дни,  
Занимались они  
Делом.”

“The queen of spades signifies secret malevolence.  
THE LATEST FORTUNETELLING BOOK”

“In nasty weather  
They would all get together  
And play;  
On the table now fifty  
Or, God help them, twice fifty  
They'd lay,  
And whenever they won,  
They chalked up the sum  
On a slate.  
So in nasty weather  
Quite busy together  
They played.”

# Epigraph 2

Il paraît que monsieur est décidément pour les suivantes.

Que voulez-vous, madame? Elles sont plus fraîches.

Светский разговор.

"It seems that the gentleman decidedly prefers the lady's maids.

What do you want, madam? They're fresher."

– Society Conversation.

# Epigraph 3

“Vous m'écrivez, mon ange, des lettres de quatre pages plus vite que je ne puis les lire.”

CORRESPONDENCE

“You write me, my angel, four-page letters more quickly than I can read them.”

Correspondence

# The Inexplicable, Mysterious, and Intriguing

“С нею был коротко знаком человек очень замечательный. Вы слышали о графе Сен-Жермене, о котором рассказывают так много чудесного. Вы знаете, что он выдавал себя за вечного жида, за изобретателя жизненного эликсира и философского камня, и прочая. Над ним смеялись, как над шарлатаном, а Казанова в своих Записках говорит, что он был шпион; впрочем, Сен-Жермен, несмотря на свою таинственность, имел очень почтенную наружность и был в обществе человек очень любезный.”

“She was closely acquainted with a very remarkable man. You've heard of the **comte de Saint-Germain**, of whom so many wonders are told. You know that he passed himself off as the **Wandering Jew**, the inventor of the elixir of life and the philosopher's stone, and so on. He was laughed at as a charlatan, and **Casanova** in his memoirs says he was a spy; however, despite his mysteriousness, Saint-Germain was of very dignified appearance and was very amiable in society” (154).

# Secrets

Барышня подняла голову и сделала знак молодому человеку. Он вспомнил, что от старой графини таили смерть ее ровесниц, и закусил себе губу. Но графиня услышала весть, для нее новую, с большим равнодушием.

“The young lady raised her head and made a sign to the young man. He remembered that they were to conceal from the old countess the deaths of women her age, and he bit his tongue. But the countess heard the news, which was new to her, with great indifference” (156).

# Secrets

Нет! кавалерист. А почему вы думали, что он инженер?

Барышня засмеялась и не отвечала ни слова.

"No, a cavalryman. What made you think he was an engineer?"

The young lady laughed and made no reply" (156).

# The Unknown

- Who is the young man outside the window who unnerves Lizaveta Ivanovna with his consistent presence and staring?

“Между им и ею учредились неусловленные сношения.”

“Unspoken relations were established between them” (158).

- “When Tomsky asked permission to introduce his friend to the countess, the poor girl’s heart leaped. But learning that Narumov was a horse guard and not an engineer, she regretted that an indiscreet question had given away her secret to the featherbrained Tomsky” (158).

# The Unknown

- “Some unknown force seemed to draw him to it. He stopped and began to look at the windows. In one of them he saw a dark-haired little head, bent, probably, over a book or some needlework. The head rose. Hermann saw a fresh face and dark eyes. That moment decided his fate” (159).

***What is his intention? Throughout his correspondence with Lizaveta Ivanovna, unclear whether he is driven by the secret of the three cards or has fallen in love with Lizaveta Ivanovna.***

- “They were no longer translations from the German. Hermann wrote them, inspired by passion, and spoke a language that was all his own: in them were expressed both the inflexibility of his desires and the disorder of an unbridled imagination” (160).

# The Unreal: Dreams

"He returned late to his humble corner; for a long time he could not fall asleep, and when sleep did come over him, he dreamed of cards, a green table, stacks of banknotes, and heaps of gold coins. He played one card after another, resolutely bent down corners, kept on winning, raked in the gold, and put the banknotes in his pocket. Waking up late, he sighed at the loss of his phantasmal riches, again went roaming about the city, and again found himself in front of Countess \* \* \*'s house. Some unknown force seemed to draw him to it" (159).

# A Fairy Tale

“-- Случай! -- сказал один из гостей. -- Сказка! -- заметил Германн. -- Может статься, порошковые карты? -- подхватил третий. -- Не думаю, -- отвечал важно Томский. -- Как! -- сказал Нарумов, -- у тебя есть бабушка, которая угадывает три карты сряду, а ты до сих пор не перенял у ней ее кабалистики?”

“Pure chance!” said one of the guests.

“A fairy tale!” observed Hermann.

“Marked cards, maybe?” chimed in a third.

“I don’t think so,” Tomsky replied imposingly.

“What!” said Narumov. “You have a grandmother who can guess three cards in a row, and you still haven’t taken over her cabbalistics from her?”

(154-5)

# The Encounter

"Don't be afraid, for God's sake, don't be afraid!" he said in a clear and low voice. "I have no intention of harming you; I've come to beg you for a favor."

**The old woman silently looked at him and seemed not to hear him.** Hermann thought she might be deaf, and, bending close to her ear, repeated the same words. **The old woman was silent as before.**

"You can make for the happiness of my life," Hermann continued, "and it won't cost you anything: I know that you can guess three cards in a row..."

Hermann stopped. The countess seemed to have understood what was asked of her; **it seemed she was seeking words for her reply.**

**"That was a joke," she said at last. "I swear to you! It was a joke!"**

"This is no joking matter," Hermann retorted angrily. "Remember Chaplitsky, whom you helped to win back his losses."

# The Encounter

**The countess was visibly disconcerted. Her features showed strong emotion, but she soon lapsed into her former insensibility.**

"Can you name those three sure cards for me?" Hermann continued.

The countess said nothing; Hermann went on.

**"Whom are you keeping your secret for?** Your grandchildren? They're rich without that; and besides, they don't know the value of money. Your three cards won't help a squanderer. A man who can't hold on to his paternal inheritance will die a pauper anyway, for all the devil's efforts. I'm not a squanderer; I know the value of money. Your three cards won't be wasted on me. Well?..."

He stopped and waited in trembling for her reply. **The countess said nothing; Hermann went on his knees.**

# The Encounter

"If your heart has ever known the feeling of love," he said, "if you remember its raptures, if you smiled even once at the cry of your newborn son, if anything human has ever beaten in your breast, I entreat you by the feelings of a wife, a mistress, a mother—by all that is sacred in life—do not refuse my request! Reveal your secret to me! What good is it to you? ... **Perhaps it's connected with a terrible sin, with the forfeit of eternal bliss, a pact with the devil ... Think: you're old; you don't have long to live—I'm ready to take your sin upon my soul.** Only reveal your secret to me. Think: a man's happiness is in your hands; not only I, but my children, my grandchildren and great-grandchildren, will bless your memory and revere it as sacred ..."'

**The old woman did not say a word.**

Hermann stood up.

"Old witch!" he said, clenching his teeth. "Then I'll make you answer ..."

With those words he took a pistol from his pocket.

# The Encounter

At the sight of the pistol, the countess showed strong emotion for the second time. She shook her head and raised her hand as if to shield herself from the shot ... Then she fell backwards and remained motionless.

"Stop being childish," said Hermann, taking her hand. "I ask you for the last time: will you name your three cards for me—yes or no?"

The countess did not reply. Hermann saw that she had died." (162-3)

# The Queen of Spades

**“tense, minimal in detail, impersonal, plot-driven”  
(Pevear 11-12)**

- Story within a story, frame within a frame, levels of reality/unreality
  - The story that Pushkin’s narrator tells us
  - The story that Tomsky tells his friends (and us)
  - The letters that pass between Hermann and Lizaveta Ivanovna
  - The dream, myths, illusions/visions

# Documentation of Social Class and Manners

- Why the ellipses/asterisks in names?
- Social class:

“For the first time in her life she stooped to discussions and explanations with him; she hoped to appeal to his conscience, indulgently pointing out to him that there are debts and debts, and there is a difference between a prince and a coach maker” (154).

# Documentation of Social Class and Manners

- Visiting when people are in the process of getting dressed:  
performance of class and power
- Age and social class:
  - The Countess is aware that she is old and is not trying to look young, but still dresses the way she was trained to do so when she was young, paying attention to each aspect of her appearance.
  - There is a tacit pact among those close to her not to tell her about the deaths of people she knew and was young with.
  - She tells her grandson “for the hundredth time” (156) the anecdote of the time she and her friend were presented to the Empress. She asks questions constantly in the carriage and expects Lizaveta Ivanovna to answer.

# Documentation of Social Class and Manners

“Reasoning thus, he found himself on one of the main streets of Petersburg, in front of a house of old-style architecture. The street was crammed with vehicles; carriages, one after another, rolled up to the brightly lit entrance. Every other minute the slim foot of a young beauty, or a jingling jackboot, or a striped stocking and diplomatic shoe extended from a carriage. Fur coats and cloaks flashed past the majestic doorman” (159).

# Documentation of Social Class and Manners

“Hermann went into the bedroom. Before a stand filled with old icons flickered a golden lamp. Faded damask armchairs and sofas with down cushions and worn-off gilding stood in mournful symmetry against the walls covered with Chinese silk. On the walls hung two portraits painted in Paris by Mme Lebrun. One of them portrayed a man of about forty, red-cheeked and portly, in a light green uniform and with a decoration; the other a young beauty with an aquiline nose, her hair brushed back at the temples, powdered and adorned with a rose. Every corner was jammed with porcelain shepherdesses, table clocks made by the famous Leroy, little boxes, bandalores, fans, and various ladies’ knickknacks, invented at the end of the last century along with Montgolfier’s balloon and Mesmer’s magnetism” (161).

# Documentation of Social Class and Manners

“The countess started to undress before the mirror. They unpinned her bonnet, decorated with roses; took the powdered wig from her gray and close-cropped head. Pins poured down like rain around her. The yellow gown embroidered with silver fell at her swollen feet. Hermann witnessed the repulsive mysteries of her toilette; finally, the countess was left in a bed jacket and nightcap; in this attire, more suitable to her old age, she seemed less horrible and ugly” (162).

# Characterization

- Pushkin's narrator gives a lot of information about different characters and manages to create rich character profiles for the major figures that populate this story.
- As a result, we do not have to do a lot of work to connect the dots to understand the characters and their motivations. These explanations are often provided to us without our having to work for them.
- However, in doing so, the narrator also leads us to what they want us to know and believe about the characters and the story.

# Documentation / Characterization

“Lizaveta Ivanovna was the household martyr. She poured tea and was reprimanded for using too much sugar; she read novels aloud and was to blame for all the author’s mistakes; she accompanied the countess on her walks and was answerable for the weather and the pavement. She had a fixed salary, which was never paid in full; and meanwhile she was required to dress like everyone else—that is, like the very few. In society she played a most pitiable role. Everyone knew her and no one noticed her; at balls she danced only when there was a lack of vis-à-vis, and ladies took her under the arm each time they had to go to the dressing room to straighten something in their outfits. She was proud, felt her position keenly, and looked about—waiting impatiently for a deliverer; but the young men, calculating in their frivolous vanity, did not deem her worthy of attention, though Lizaveta Ivanovna was a hundred times nicer than the cold and insolent brides they dangled after. So many times, quietly leaving the dull and magnificent drawing room, she went to weep in her poor room, where stood a folding wallpaper screen, a chest of drawers, a small mirror, and a painted bed, and where a tallow candle burned dimly in a brass candlestick!” (157)

# Characterization: Hermann

“Hermann was the son of a Russified German, who had left him a small capital. Being firmly convinced of the necessity of ensuring his independence, Hermann did not even touch the interest, lived on his pay alone, and did not allow himself the slightest whimsy. However, he was secretive and ambitious, and his comrades rarely had the chance to laugh at his excessive frugality. He was a man of strong passions and fiery imagination, but firmness saved him from the usual errors of youth. Thus, for instance, though he was a gambler at heart, he never touched cards, for he reckoned that in his position he could not afford (as he used to say) to sacrifice the necessary in hopes of acquiring the superfluous—and meanwhile he spent whole nights at the card tables and followed with feverish trembling the various turns of the game” (158).

# Characterization: Hermann

“The story of the three cards had a strong effect on his imagination and did not leave his mind the whole night. “What if,” he thought the next evening, roaming about Petersburg, “what if the old countess should reveal her secret to me! Or tell me the names of those three sure cards! Why not try my luck?...Get introduced to her, curry favor with her— maybe become her lover—but all that takes time—and she’s eighty-seven years old—she could die in a week—in two days!...And the story itself...Can you trust it?...No! Calculation, moderation, and diligence: those are my three sure cards, there’s what will triple, even septuple my capital, and provide me with peace and independence!” (158)

# Characterization: The Countess

“Like all old people generally, the countess suffered from insomnia. Having undressed, she sat down by the window in the Voltaire armchair and dismissed her maids. The candles were taken away, the room was again lit only by the icon lamp. The countess sat all yellow, moving her pendulous lips, swaying from side to side. Her dull eyes showed a complete absence of thought; looking at her, one might have thought that the frightful old woman’s swaying came not from her will, but from the action of some hidden galvanism.

Suddenly that dead face changed inexplicably. Her lips stopped moving, her eyes came to life: before the countess stood an unknown man” (162).

*From being an “unreal,” high-society socialite, the Countess becomes “real” when she removes her clothes and make-up and is revealed to be an old woman, human, and wrinkled, suffering from insomnia.*

*At the same time, the suggestion of a “hidden galvanism” inside her makes her again somewhat unreal.*

# Critique of Contemporary Literary Culture

“Paul!” the countess called out from behind the screen. “Send me some new novel, only, please, not like they write nowadays.”

“How do you mean, grand’maman?”

“I mean the kind of novel where the hero doesn’t strangle his father or mother, and where there are no drowned bodies. I’m terribly afraid of drowned bodies!”

“There are no such novels nowadays. Or maybe you’d like a Russian one?”

“You mean there are Russian novels? ... Send me one, old boy, please do send me one!”

# Intertextuality

- Intertextuality is the practice of an author referring to or using other literary texts in their own literary work.
  - Quotes Dante: “Bitter is another’s bread, says Dante, and hard it is climbing another’s stairs, and who knows the bitterness of dependency if not the poor ward of an aristocratic old woman?” (157)
  - German Literature: “The letter contained a declaration of love: it was tender, respectful, and taken word for word from a German novel. But Lizaveta Ivanovna did not know German and was very pleased with it” (159).

# Metatextuality

- “The Queen of Spades” is aware of its own composition as a literary text: “Once—this happened two days after the evening described at the start of this story” (158).

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