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Tatiana in Film

Alexander Pushkin shepherded a significant transformation in Russian Literature during the 19th century. His writing opened the doors of Russian writing from odes and verses, to prose and colloquial language. At a time when many Russians were beginning to see themselves as individuals with rights, Pushkin used literature, for the first time, to show everyday Russian life. Pushkin introduced ideas and themes from Western Europe, from romanticism to liberalism. These ideas and themes are borrowed, but not promoted in *Eugene Onegin*. Alongside the readers of the time, his characters (including the narrator) struggle to understand and find their place in rapidly changing Russian Society.

Onegin, the titular hero, is Pushkin’s modification of the romantic Byronic hero—dramatic, charming, and cynical. We are introduced to him as he charms the nobility of Saint Petersburg, seduces scores of women, and lives it up in high Russian society. He has immense presence both in the minds of the readers and the characters. In stark contrast is Tatiana, reserved, impassioned, and naïve, who “seemed among her kin a stranger” (Pushkin 47 25). It is the interplay, contrast, and parallel metamorphosis of Onegin and Tatiana that drives *Eugene Onegin*. While Onegin’s evolution leaves him “forsaken” and “at his station” (Pushkin 210, 48), Tatiana’s struggles refine her. She evolves from a “spontaneous stage-one outpouring of emotion” to a “dynamic synthesis… an ‘iconic, fully integrated self… ‘comme il faut’” (Levitt, 52). In this essay, I will examine Tatiana in the scene where she visits Onegin’s library, comparing the original novel and the 1999 Film adaptation. I argue that this scene exhibits the movie’s failure to properly set up and convey her evolution.

The first difference in the Fiennes’ interpretation is that the film breaks Tanya’s visit to Onegin’s library into two different scenes. In the novel, Tatiana visits Onegin’s library only once, after Onegin kills Lensky in a duel and takes off to roam Europe. She is drawn to his library “assailed by doubts” (Pushkin, 163, 15), torn between her “heart speak[ing] out in urgent fashion / of faraway Eugene” and the “awful” knowledge that he is “her brother’s slayer” and thus “hateful” because of it (162, 14).

The first scene in the movie intentionally lacks the weight of this moment, as it’s Tatiana’s first time talking to Onegin. This scene effectively acts as a stand in for the single point in the book before writing her letter that Tatiana meets Onegin. The scene starts with Tanya walking alone at a distance from Onegin’s doorstep. She is bathed in light as he is cloaked in darkness, barely visible beneath his doorframe (Fiennes, 21:20). She is dressed in all white, him in all black. Her entrance continues the contrast—a bookshelf physically divides Tatiana and Onegin as she looks over his drawings of Saint Petersburg, which she finds “strange”( Fiennes, 22:50). When Onegin provides book recommendations to Tatiana, he provides Rousseau and Richardson, notably the authors she “loved” that “set her heart aglow” as a child (Pushkin, 49, 29). While in the novel Tatiana alone ascribes the attributes of Rousseau’s hero to Onegin, seeing “the lover of Julie Wolmar… all [in] Onegin’s Face”, (Pushkin 61, 9) in the movie it is Onegin that provides the connection between the heroes of her novel and himself. This serves Fiennes two purposes. First, it sets up Tatiana’s interest Onegin as being far more mutual than in Pushkin’s novel, helping move the plot and viewer investment of the romance along. Second, it begins to tie the emotions Tatiana experiences with the direct actions of Onegin.

The second scene stays truer to the book but continues to emphasis the connection between Tatiana’s feelings and Onegin’s. As Tatiana walks through Onegin’s library, the camera lingers on two of Onegin’s illustrations, immediately preceded by Tatiana looking toward up and beyond the camera (Fiennes, 102:58, 103:38). The first item is a biblical image of a Man, Deity figure, and Satan, while the second is a drawing of her, done by Onegin. It is clear she is struggling with her love of Onegin and his apparent darkness. As Levitt states, Tatiana realizes “she had ‘misread’ Onegin”, that he possessed an “‘immoral soul’ and ‘malicious mind’” (Levitt, 50). The questions Tatiana asks in this scene of the novel—is he “work of heaven or of hell”? “An imitation?”? A “compendium of affection”? (Pushkin, 167, 24)— are implied but not stated by the long pans and mirrored reactions given by Tatiana.

Given the lack of her dream scene, where Onegin is figuratively portrayed as a vicious bear, this scene in the movie is immensely important in her growth in understanding her love of Onegin. Particularly, it is the questions that matter. Emerson states that “These questions matter… because real inner change is never perfectly transcribable on the outside” (Emerson, 8). The movie, however, fails to express transcribe without the presence of a narrator. In the book, according to Emerson, it is the presence of a narrator that “give[s] the illusion of biographical transcribable”, with commentary and descriptions of each scene. The movie could have made up for the lack of a narrator in this scene if the cultural allusions of Pushkin were maintained or if, perhaps, more time was spent in portraying the nuances of Tatiana’s confliction. However, Fiennes fails to do this as well. The statues of Byron and Napoleon, who “preside over Onegin’s library…[and] serve as an embodiment of those two or three ‘Byronic’ novels that reveal the true nature of Onegin’s behavior” are gone or indistinguishable (Levitt, 50). In the novel, Tatiana looks through Onegin’s book, paying attention so closely as to notice “The traces / Where fingernails had sharply pressed… crosses or a jotted note / or in a question mark he wrote”, and reads his notes in the margins with “special care”. It is in this meticulous inspection of Onegin’s environment and books that Tatiana can find “Onegin’s soul reflected”, and make her own judgements on him (Pushkin, 167). Tatiana’s thought process and discovery are not captured in what is a less than two-minute scene.

Ultimately, *Onegin* is betrayed by its medium, from the second the viewer sees the timestamp. In the very act of filming Onegin, thus taking away the ambiguity of his existence, the movie misses out on Pushkin’s creative manipulations that rely on “‘reality’ [being] filtered through culture, convention, language” (Levitt, 45). The splitting and reworking of this scene to add Onegin’s presence reflects Fiennes’ need to expand Pushkin’s minimalist plot and romance in a filmable way. However, without “love begin[ing] as an artificed construct” between Tatiana and Onegin, the film cannot express Tatiana’s “real inner change” (Emerson, 9) as she realizes who Onegin really is. So much of her character shown in the film is tied with the direct actions of Onegin, that Pushkin’s revealing of Tatiana “as the personification of mature Pushkinian poetry” (Levitt, 52) in her evolved form seems instead to bring up the question: what does this mean for Onegin?

Bibliography

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Chris, this is a very well-argued paper that makes good use of secondary sources and provide detailed analyses of both the film and the novel. My only recommendation is to be more careful when writing – proofread your work, make sure your sentence structure works and that you choose the right vocabulary.

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| 20% Clarity and organization | 19 |
| 20% Clarity and relevance of “mini-thesis” | 20 |
| 25% Originality of analysis and explanation of evidence | 25 |
| 20% Use of secondary sources | 20 |
| 15% Grammar, style, mechanics, format | 14 |

Total: 98; 3,5 days late: -5 points

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