

This 1827 portrait of Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837) by Vasily Tropinin, done from life by an artist who was the favoured painter of Moscow's 'middling sort' (successful merchants, civil servants, and respectable writers) is at first sight a workaday likeness. In contrast to a contemporary, Orest Kiprensky, who produced a full-blown Romantic portrait of Pushkin, eyes raised, arms folded, and statue of the Muse at his back, Tropinin gives the poet only one 'writerly' accessory, the sheaf of manuscript under his right arm. At the same time, Pushkin is handled rather differently from Tropinin's other subjects. His fraying scarf, carelessly knotted at his badly ironed collar, and long dirty fingernails, suggest unconcern with trivialities such as grooming; his sideways gaze conveys abstraction; and his prominent strabismus (barely noticeable in most portraits) implies internal conflict. The picture shows Pushkin at the pinnacle of his lifetime fame. A byword for youthful brilliance even in an age where precocity was taken for granted (he had begun publishing while still at the lyceum School in Tsarskoe Selo, and his early works included the sparkling mock-epic *Ruslan and Ludmila*, written in his late teens), Pushkin achieved still greater notoriety when he was exiled for political insubordination in 1820. Outside the capital until 1826, he remained at the centre of literary life: *The Prisoner of the Caucasus* (1822), the early chapters of *Eugeny Onegin*, and the lyric poems of 1820-5 had a huge popular and literary success and remained the benchmark of his achievement for many critics and ordinary readers. During the late 1820s and early 1830s, Pushkin's circumstances were to become increasingly difficult, as a result of political surveillance, a troubled marriage, and a problematic relationship with his readers. Later works, such as the historical narrative poem *Poltava* (1828), received a relatively cool reception, and the last years of the poet's life, culminating in his death

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# Russian Literature A Very Short Introduction

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