
Love and Heartache in 19th Century Russian Literature

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Introduction

Nineteenth century Russian literature is widely regarded as a formative period in the nation's literary history, marked by a poignant ability to accurately capture human sentiment through fictitious characters. Nearly two-hundred years removed, the works of artists ranging from Alexander Pushkin to Lev Tolstoy to Anton Chekhov remain provoking today. By detailing human experiences that are common to us all, such as love, these authors have the estimable capacity to transcend time and leave legacies of work that persist for centuries. Perhaps the most recurrent and impactful theme among this fascinating period of literature is love. The aforementioned nineteenth century Russian authors, namely Pushkin, Lermontov, Turgenev, Tolstoy, and Chekhov, dynamically weave various types of love into their works by fostering complicated yet realistic relationships between protagonists and emphasizing the complex nature of this often-tumultuous emotion. In examining the short stories and novels from this critical period of literature and analyzing the various types of love herein, ranging from romantic love in Pushkin's "The Blizzard" to the inability to love observed in Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time* to the selfless love displayed in Chekhov's "The Darling," it becomes evident that the tribulations of love are remarkably consistent in the human experience and can engage readers from otherwise distant time periods.

Romantic Love in Pushkin's, Turgenev's, and Tolstoy's Short Works

Romantic love has long been a priority for humans, regardless of time period. As C.S. Lewis describes *eros*, the state of “being in love” in his philosophical essay *The Four Loves*, “ – it feels objective; something outside us, in the real world.”¹ Wanting to be in love is a quintessentially human desire, and its universality makes it a perpetually relevant topic in literature. Naturally, the Russian authors of the nineteenth century take advantage of this yearning common to all readers and effortlessly assimilate romanticism into their works.

In Alexander Pushkin's short story “The Blizzard,” written under his alias Ivan Belkin, we see the struggle of a sincere romantic love that is confined by socio-economic class followed by a fairytale-esque resolution for Masha and Burmin. When Pushkin debuted his prose in *The Tales of Belkin*, he faced criticism for the triviality of the stories in comparison to his “glorious, bountiful, redolent” verse. One critic went as far as saying they are “not artistic creations,” but rather “fatal [errors]” in a profound literary career.² While simple in its premise, this tender tale of love and heartache is refreshingly optimistic, leaving readers feeling hopeful about romance and intrigued by the role chance plays in life.

The heroine, Masha, encounters presumably genuine love twice in the course of the short story. Her parents disprove of her love for Vladimir, a man of lower social status, so she conspires to elope with him in the dead of night and beg for their forgiveness thereafter. In a series of coincidental events, the man she later falls in love with, Burmin, is already her husband, as he married her whilst she was in a feverish delirium as a prank. Albeit banal, there is something beautiful about the simplicity of the story. The idealistic depiction of romantic love tugs at the vulnerability of humans, at the desires we all share. In spite of its dated fictitiousness, it continues to satisfy modern readers with its pleasant ending. Simplicity does not

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 136.

² David M. Bethea and Sergei Davydov, “Pushkin's Saturnine Cupid,” 8.

equate to lack of artistry and the appeal of “The Blizzard” is its modest progression to Masha and Burmin’s romantic triumph.

In Lev Tolstoy’s short story “After the Dance,” we initially see Ivan consumed by his infatuation for the regal Varenka. At first glance, this story evokes the same sweet sentiments as Pushkin’s “The Blizzard.” Similar to Masha’s feelings for Vladimir then Burmin, Ivan is desperately in love with Varenka. While at the ball he “embraced the whole world with [his] love.”³ Having achieved this grandiose love, he is suddenly content with his whole life and “drunk with love.”⁴ By portraying Ivan as utterly fulfilled while in love with Varenka, Tolstoy speaks to the immense influence love can have on a person.

Unfortunately for Ivan, his fairytale comes to an abrupt end when he witnesses Varenka’s father, the colonel, mercilessly torment a prisoner. On the surface, the story of Ivan and Varenka at the ball was a delightful romance, but it quickly shifts to a commentary on corporal punishment and the nature of evil in humanity. Although Tolstoy likely intended to use the romance as a vessel for the true moral of the story, there is still something to be extrapolated about romantic love from this short tale. Ivan is blinded by his own happiness. We see this same romance-induced blindness in Masha and Vladimir’s actions, as they are willing to go to extraordinary measures to marry and are unfazed by the potential consequences.

Ivan admits in the beginning of the story he “- was a very pert and merry lad, and rich besides.”⁵ Ivan is in a position of privilege and is indulged by Varenka, by love. In this moment, engulfed in the overwhelming glee he has from dancing all night with Varenka, he is ignorant to the existence of suffering. Furthermore, as soon as he sees the inhumane punishment, he instantaneously falls out of love. One byproduct of this shorty story is thus an awareness of how powerful romantic love

³ Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich and Other Short Stories*, 301.

⁴ Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich and Other Short Stories*, 298.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 297.

can be and a concurrent understanding that it is not as durable as Pushkin makes it out to be in Masha and Burmin's fortunate fate.

Similar to Tolstoy's more realistic depiction of romance, Ivan Turgenev details the passionate yet painful phenomenon of love in his novella *First Love*. The protagonist, Vladimir, proceeds to tell the "unusual" story of his first love for Princess Zinaida, herein referred to as Zinaida. The two predominant themes of this novella are youth and love, as Vladimir is a young 16 years when he becomes infatuated with the dominatrix Zinaida. Aside from Princess Zasekina, love seems to affect all characters in this novella. In contrast to Pushkin's utopian resolution for Masha and Burmin, we learn here that romantic love can often be a heart-rending experience.

Originally, Zinaida appears to be in the position of power, inflicting pain on the many men who seek her. With some five suitors in addition to Vladimir (and his father), Zinaida is able to take advantage of the men who covet her. In her analysis of *First Love*, Judith Mills agrees that Zinaida is imperious and exercises complete control over her suitors. Further, she argues that the love Vladimir pines after is painful, making it more attractive to the child-like protagonist. Mills proposes Vladimir's first encounter with Zinaida foreshadows the pain men endure in involving themselves with her, as he watches her strike the foreheads of her suitors with a flower.⁶ This is a conceivable interpretation, seeing as Vladimir is a naïve and impassioned young man guided by idealistic romanticism. Moreover, love is painful, and Mills believes that Vladimir will not find the "exceptionally strong" love he desires without the masochistic elements illustrated in this foreshadowing.

In the end, the three main characters in *First Love* experience the pain foreshadowed in the beginning, corroborating the notion that romantic love is not as seamless as Pushkin portrays it. Not only is Vladimir viewed as an immature child by the woman he loves, but he also observes the

⁶ Judith Oloskey Mills, "Theme and Symbol in 'First Love,'" 436-437.

abusive relationship between his ideal lover and his father. Zinaida, the woman who we assumed had complete control over the situation, is dominated by the enigmatic Pyotr, and Pyotr is left utterly afraid of the power love can have. On his deathbed, Pyotr writes to Vladimir, telling him to “ – beware of the love of a woman, beware of that joy, that poison...”⁷ Again, this speaks to the profound influence love has on people. In “After the Ball,” Ivan too knows this romance-fueled bliss. In both stories, we see how quickly this rapture can shift to something ugly and prompt psychological torment amongst our love interests.

Romantic love evidently serves a purpose in life and literature alike. Pushkin, Tolstoy, and Turgenev incorporate this universal feeling into their works and demonstrate the duality of love by emphasizing both the pleasure and pain it prompts. While Pushkin’s “The Blizzard” may be too quixotic in its resolution, Tolstoy’s “After the Ball” and Turgenev’s *First Love* demonstrate how painful this passion can be. Likewise, there is no singular experience that could encompass all of romanticism, so it is necessary to see both the visionary and skeptical portrayals of love to capture the essence of this inherently personal emotion.

Inability to Love in Lermontov’s *A Hero of Our Time* and Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons*

An initial reading of Mikhail Lermontov’s *A Hero of Our Time* leaves readers feeling quite cynical about the existence of love. Lermontov’s infamous superfluous man, Pechorin, appears to be incapable of love. Perhaps it is more accurate to say Pechorin was not incapable of love but rather uninterested in experiencing it. He affirms this several times throughout the novel, saying that “-the first hint that [a woman] expects [him] to marry her banishes [his] love for good...[He’ll] make any sacrifice except this one.”⁸ Respectably self-aware, Pechorin chooses himself over the various women he attracts with little regard to the consequences his actions have on others. Therefore, Pechorin is not totally

⁷ George Gibian, *The Portable Nineteenth-Century Russian Reader*, 388.

⁸ Mikhail Lermontov, *A Hero of Our Time*, 123.

void of love, but his self-destructive conceit prevents him from truly loving anyone, himself included.

Throughout the novel, our Byronic hero Pechorin encounters various love interests. In “Princess Mary,” Pechorin entertains himself by toying with Mary while having an affair with Vera, a woman he seems to genuinely care for. There is a demonic quality about Pechorin’s approach to life, particularly the way he invokes misery on nearly every person he comes across. Seeley describes Pechorin as an “emotionally frigid” man who requires the dissatisfaction of his partner. Likewise, simply put, he is cruel. He is amused by Grushnitsky’s humiliation and seems to enjoy wreaking havoc on Mary’s life after seducing her.⁹ This is a sensible conclusion to make given his record of ruthlessness in interacting with other people, but leaves readers wondering the purpose of his unnecessary coldness when many women are willing to love him despite his arrogant demeanor.

C.S. Lewis says that “to love at all is to be vulnerable,”¹⁰ so it might be reasonable to claim that Pechorin lacks the vulnerability needed to accept and give love. However, Pechorin is a master of self-analysis. His own self-awareness is in and of itself admirably vulnerable. He even labels himself a “moral cripple,” recognizing his own pitfalls. This level of critical and relentless self-analysis suggests he can be vulnerable with himself at the very least. Instead, Seeley claims “- and just as self-love warps the vision of our heroes’ intelligence, so it cripples their tenderness.”¹¹ Pechorin’s unwavering sense of self and respect for his own desires come at the expense of Mary and Vera, among countless others. Although I am hesitant to label Pechorin’s feelings toward himself as “self-love,” there is most definitely an incapacitating aspect of his prideful persona that prevents him from indulging in love. It appears as though he

⁹ Frank Friedeberg Seeley, “The Heyday of the ‘Superfluous Man’ in Russia,” 106.

¹⁰ Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 169.

¹¹ Seeley, “The Heyday of the ‘Superfluous Man’ in Russia,” 101.

projects his inability to love himself onto others, and, as a consequence, he unsparingly hurts the people around him.

While Pechorin is arguably the most robust example of this “inability to love,” there are other characters from this age that evoke similar sympathies. Immediately, I am reminded of Bazarov’s self-destructive tendencies in Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons*. Like Pechorin, Bazarov condemns romantic love. He outwardly states his disapproval of love several times in favor of the pragmatism his nihilistic worldview offers him. Bazarov is angry when he falls for Anna Odentsova because the feeling of love contradicts the philosophy he has so proudly boasted. Unlike Pechorin, however, Bazarov cannot ignore the overwhelming love he develops for Anna and succumbs to it by admitting his love for her. Because Bazarov represents a selfless dedication to an ideal, this confession is particularly evocative and again demonstrates the influence love can have on a person. Ultimately, his love is unreciprocated, and his incapacity to confront his own passion manifests as a physical disease.

Despite the fact that Pechorin is the archetypal superfluous man and Bazarov is the new man, there are some striking similarities in their characterization that could explain their apparent inability to love. Both Pechorin and Bazarov approach life with an obvious indifference to their surroundings. Bazarov is irrefutably disrespectful to those who do not share his revolutionary viewpoint, and Pechorin has absolutely no concern for the repercussions of his inconsiderate actions. Moreover, both Pechorin and Bazarov are grossly arrogant, and in the context of romance, there is little room for the indifference, disrespect, and pomposity these men clearly possess. Together, these qualities contribute to their perceived inability to express and accept love openly and unfortunately lead to their own psychological suffering.

Interestingly, we see a comparable arrogance in Stepan Kasatsky in Tolstoy’s “Father Sergius.” Stepan’s pride takes a hit when he learns that his fiancé is having an affair with the tsar, so he retreats to the orthodoxy to cope with the betrayal. Presumably, his own arrogance and aspiration

for greatness influence this drastic transformation. Even so, as a monk, he still grapples with hubris, boredom, lust, and is tempted by the seductress Makovkina so much so that he cuts off his own finger. Nonetheless, Father Sergius is praised for his holiness, but he internally struggles with his own journey to faith. Confined by his own pride, he cannot admit this truth to the people that admire him. Thus, Tolstoy, Turgenev, and Lermontov all emphasize the inimical nature of arrogance as it pertains to romantic and spiritual love.

However, we witness the inevitable deterioration of these self-important complexes in Pechorin, Bazarov, and Father Sergius alike. In the final part of “Princess Mary,” Pechorin’s loveless front crumbles as he weeps over Vera. There is something humanizing about this moment where the demonic qualities of Pechorin’s characterization cease to exist temporarily. Likewise, because Pechorin is so callous in earlier parts of the novel, this surprisingly vulnerable moment invites readers to empathize with an otherwise provocative character. Evidently, even the classic example of the hard-hearted superfluous man is not immune to heartache.

Bazarov, on the other hand, realizes sooner that he cannot quell his love for Anna, and, despite admitting his love, is left alone and loveless. This confession begins to dismantle his pompous attitude and solicits sympathy from the readers as we watch him deteriorate both physically and spiritually. Despite the deconstruction of this arrogance among Bazarov and Pechorin, the men die mostly unchanged, whereas Father Sergius is saved from his own vanity upon visiting Pashenka. Pashenka is his salvation – her humble and honest life permeates Father Sergius’s egoism and elucidates his path to a fulfilling life.

After analyzing Pechorin, among other “incapable” lovers, it is obvious that this perceived inability to love does not indicate an absence of wanting love. Pechorin and Bazarov are just as susceptible to this instinctual longing for love despite initially rejecting it, but their own vanity, negativity, and disregard for the feelings of others prevent them

from attaining it. Even in the seemingly pessimistic stories Lermontov and Turgenev present, we still see the same themes of (troubled) love and heartache, corroborating the notion that these are omnipresent experiences.

Unconditional Love in Chekhov's "The Darling" and Tolstoy's Moral Short Stories

In a stark juxtaposition to Pechorin's selfish demeanor, Anton Chekhov creates a selfless woman who exemplifies the meaning of unconditional love in his short story "The Darling." Olenka, also known as the darling, experiences tremendous heartache throughout the duration of the tale, losing her father and several lovers. Despite this, she does not become skeptical of love. Admirably, she is still open to the prospect of love and actively seeks to fill the void in her life upon the loss of her several romantic partners. Her imperturbable resilience and dedication to loving compassionately is inspiring, especially in comparison to the disillusioned men discussed previously.

While Olenka's resilience in seeking and giving love is indisputable, critics often debate her perplexing characterization. The darling has become an archetype of sorts – the extraordinarily passive female who lives for others. Some have painted her as simple, almost comically so, and conclude that she lacks her own identity. Heldt argues that Olenka's existence ranges from "quiet desperation to palpable disaster," yet she reminds us that Olenka also experiences periodic bliss when she has a man to love. Heldt then emphasizes the fact that our heroine falls in love four times, which trivializes the significance of this emotion. Further, Olenka seems to completely forget her past lovers and lives in an "emotionally intense present that totally obliterates the past."¹² Although there is a routine aspect of Olenka's tendency to fall in love quickly, the conclusion that this behavior compromises the rigor of this feeling is unwarranted. Olenka is one of the few enlightened characters that has the capacity to continue to love passionately in spite of unfavorable circumstances.

¹² Barbara Heldt, "Chekhov (and Flaubert) on Female Devotion," 166-167.

Olenka is frequently criticized for her proclivity to adopt the opinions of the men she loves. It is reasonable to infer that this behavior is indicative of her lack of identity. The narrator tells us that she can see physical objects but is unable to make opinions of them, commenting “ – how terrible it was to not have any opinions.”¹³ Taken literally, her lack of opinions may point to an inborn shallowness within her persona, but I interpret this internal emptiness as a sincere and unyielding desire to love others, not a desperate grasp at superficial love.

Olenka “forever loved someone,”¹⁴ and there is something so beautiful about how fervidly she loves the people in her life. Her willingness to support Kukin, Pustovalov, Smirnin and Sasha by expressing their opinions as her own should not be denounced but rather celebrated. She selflessly and unconditionally loves all of the people she interacts with, and even in the face of unimaginable loss, her loving nature prevails. If more people approached love with her same fervor, the anguish that love so often causes could be mitigated.

Olenka’s selfless nature parallels that of Pashenka in “Father Sergius.” As I briefly mentioned in the prior analysis, Father Sergius finds his salvation in Pashenka, realizing that he must begin living his life for others the way she so humbly does. He notes he had “lived for people under the pretext of God, she lives for God, fancying she lives for people.”¹⁵ This distinction is important and almost instantaneously changes the trajectory of his sinful life. Father Sergius begins living, not for the glory, but for God and his love.

Tolstoy reminds us that there is something bigger than the “natural loves,” a goodness that, according to C.S. Lewis, can only be described as love for the Beloved.¹⁶ The love for God is all powerful and is merely supplemented by the “need-loves,” such as romance and friendship, with

¹³ Anton Chekhov, *Anton Chekhov’s Selected Stories*, 340.

¹⁴ Chekhov, *Anton Chekhov’s Selected Stories*, 334.

¹⁵ Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich and Other Short Stories*, 294.

¹⁶ Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 163.

which He bestows onto us. When one grapples with the existence of this spiritual love, it inflicts a form of existential dread that compromises any semblance of romantic love. We see this repeatedly in Tolstoy's semi-autobiographical short stories that parallel his own quest to understand the purpose of life.

"Father Sergius" and "The Diary of a Madman" are two prominent examples of this moralistic questioning. While Father Sergius is confined by his own vanity, there is a different internal qualm witnessed in the madman's tale. The unnamed madman struggles to understand the meaning of life and death and sends himself into a psychological frenzy attempting to unpack these vast questions. In the end, he finds God and rejects materialism. He becomes acutely aware of the suffering he would cause in purchasing more land and instead seeks to live a modest life of charity to serve God's people.

Ultimately, this moral qualm and its sublime resolution indicates the immense power spiritual love has in our lives. Both men are saved by God's love and in turn develop a deep appreciation for humanity. This sincere compassion is interpreted as a greater love for all people, albeit in a non-romantic way. Spiritual salvage allows Father Sergius and the madman to love their neighbors in a selfless manner the way Olenka and Pashenka have been loving this entire time. Tolstoy is perhaps the biggest champion of love, telling us that "love is life...and love is God," and we learn from his moral writings that spiritual love enriches our capacity to love others unselfishly.

Conclusion

The purpose of this analysis was to highlight the various forms of love we see in a truly influential period of Russian literature. In surveying romantic love, ranging from Pushkin's blissful love story to Turgenev's painful account of a boy's first love, it became clear that romance is an instinctual desire that can drive people to do profound things. Despite this, romantic love cannot protect us from inevitable pain, as Tolstoy and Turgenev remind us, and the love-induced utopia is fleeting. Moreover, a

critical analysis of Pechorin and Bazarov revealed to us that nobody is immune to heartache, and while it seems as though they are incapable of love due to their own arrogance, this does not equate to not wanting love. Lastly, Chekhov and Tolstoy show us the meaning of selfless love in characterizing Olenka and Pashenka, respectively. Tolstoy iterates the importance of spiritual love in his later semi-autobiographical works and demonstrates that a love for God improves our ability to love his people.

Between them, these authors each have an exceptional capacity to connect to their readers, despite writing these works some two hundred years ago. Pushkin, Lermontov, Turgenev, Tolstoy, and Chekhov alike all seamlessly integrate love, in a plethora of forms, into their works and showcase its duplexity. We all find pleasure and pain in love, making the triumphs and troubles the characters of this era endure all the more relatable. In the words of C.S. Lewis “all that is not eternal is eternally out of date,”¹⁷ and love is arguably the most eternal human sensation. Therefore, the works discussed here will continue to provoke readers for centuries to come.

¹⁷ Lewis, *The Four Loves*.

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