



Off The Couch

Psychoanalysis
and
Culture



V3N2

“Psychoanalysis, unfortunately, has scarcely anything to say about beauty either. All that seems certain is its derivation from the field of sexual feeling. The love of beauty seems a perfect example of an impulse inhibited in its aim. ‘Beauty’ and ‘attraction’ are originally attributes of the sexual object.”

Sigmund Freud, Civilization and its Discontents.

“all creation is really a re-creation of a once loved and once whole, but now lost and ruined object, a ruined internal world and self. It is when the world within us is destroyed, when it is dead and loveless, when our loved ones are in fragments, and we ourselves in helpless despair—it is then that we must re-create our world anew, re-assemble the pieces, infuse life into dead fragments, re-create life.”

Hanna Segal A Psycho-Analytical Approach to Aesthetics.

For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror, which we are still just able to endure,
and we are so awed because it serenely disdains to annihilate us.

First Duino Elegies
Rainer Maria Rilke

Submissions

We welcome submissions, suggestions for articles, original poetry, photography or art, reviews of books, plays, movies, music.

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Editor's Note

In 2013-14, I intend to concentrate on opera. In particular, I will review many of the operas broadcast in HD by the Metropolitan Opera in New York City. If we think of opera as a synthesis of music and drama, my own interest lies more on the dramatic side, what the director brings to the operatic vision. In this view, the music enhances the drama, brings out its emotionality and underscores personality and interaction. The Met's HD productions are ideal for this point of view, with their closeups of the singer's expressions and movements. The Met under Peter Gelb has developed new productions of operas with a variety of directors drawn not just from opera, but drama, musical theater and even the circus. My reviews will focus on a psychoanalytic point of view of character development and dramatic development.

If any of our subscribers would like to contribute to this effort, please contact me.

Robert White



I. Metropolitan Opera Live in HD

The first Metropolitan Opera Live in HD series for 2013-4 was *Eugene Onegin*, broadcast on October 5, 2013 in a new production. It was designed and directed by Deborah Warner and Fiona Shaw. Valery Gergiev conducted; he is the general and artistic director of the Mariinsky Theatre and principal conductor of the London Symphony Orchestra. Tatiana was sung by Anna Netrebko, Olga by Oksana Volkova, Lenski by Piotr Beczala and Onegin by Mariusz Kwiecien. The setting was realistic and set in the time of the novel.

II. The novel

Eugene Onegin by Alexander Sergeyevich Pushkin (1799-1837) is a verse novel made up of 389 stanzas of iambic tetrameter. It was published in serial form in 1825-32. It is considered to be a classic of Russian literature. Pushkin is thought by many to be the greatest Russian poet and the founder of modern Russian novel.

III. The opera

Eugene Onegin, Op. 24, is an opera in 3 acts and 7 scenes, composed by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky. The libretto was organized by the composer and Konstantin Shilovsky. The opera was first performed in Moscow in 1879. Tchaikovsky used original verses from Pushkin's novel and chose scenes that involved the emotional world and fortunes of his heroes, calling the opera "lyrical scenes." The opera is episodic; there is no continuous story, just selected highlights of Onegin's life. Since the novel was so well known in Russia, the audience could easily fill in what was missing. Gergiev says in an interview for the broadcast that he was required as a child to memorize Onegin. The United States premiere was given on March 24, 1920 at the Metropolitan Opera in New York.

IV. Eugene Onegin

For this review, I will



Act One Set

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Mariusz Kwiecien (1, XXXVIII), “nothing moved him, he noticed nothing (1, XXXVIII). He tried to write or read but had no real interest (1, XLIV). His father died, leaving large bills (1, LI). His rich uncle was dying and Onegin is there to get his inheritance. Even here there is no human connection: “But, good God, what a bore to sit by a sick man both day and night without moving a step away” (1, I). “Eugene... drove headlong, traveling post, and yawned already in anticipation, preparing, for the sake of money, for sighs, boredom, and deceit(1, LII). Upon his uncle’s death, Onegin inherited a rural estate. The novelty of the new estate lasted only briefly and the “boredom was the same” (1, LIV).

In the second chapter, Onegin is living in his rural estate. The novel does not specify a location but this section of the novel was written in Mihaylovskoe at Pushkin’s mother’s country estate, south of St. Petersburg where Pushkin was in exile. Neighbors visit but he is not welcoming (2, V). A new man arrived in the district, Vladimir Lenski, a poet, a romantic, a philosopher (2, VI). He was deemed a good catch by the mothers of the district (2, XII). Lenski struck up a friendship with Onegin, “and soon became inseparable” (2, XIII). Lenski had been a childhood playmate of Olga Larin (2, XXI).



Anna Netrebko

concentrate on the character of Eugene Onegin and his unconscious motivations.

The opera begins in the Larin estate. However the novel begins much earlier in St. Petersburg. The first chapter sketches Onegin’s life and character. His father was a ruined man (1, III). There was no mention of his mother but he was raised by tutors and governesses (III). He turned out to be “clever and very nice” (1, IV) but had no depth. He could speak well, “slightly to touch on everything” (1, V) yet only knew enough to impress (1, VI). He was a genius in one thing: seduction (1, VIII). Not only would he seduce the woman but he would befriend the husband to allay suspicion (1, XII). He is constantly in motion, a dinner, a ball, the theatre. He would spend hours in dress and toilet. “He three hours, at the least, in front of mirrors spent” (1, XXV). He would then sleep until the late afternoon (1, XXXVI), to repeat the same. “But toward life became quite cold”



Piotr Beczala i-

The opera picks up in the third chapter. In the opening scene, Madame Larina and Filippyevna, the girl’s nurse, are working in the kitchen and the two sisters are heard outside singing a duet to love. Their father had died. The set design evokes a rustic kitchen and a tree lined garden outside dimly seen through semi-opaque glass windows. Larina and Filippyevna then sing a duet about youthful love. They pose one of the fateful questions in the opera:



Onegin confronting Tatiana about her letter

Habit is sent us from above
in place of happiness. (Act 1, Scene 1)

Does one accede to marriage, family and age where youthful passions mutate into comfort and sorrow, or does one hold onto passion and excitement and youth at the expense of relationships? This is a restatement of Freud’s two principles, primary and secondary process. As we will see, different characters in this drama fall on different sides of this question.

Lenski shows up for a visit and has brought Onegin with him. In the novel, it is clear that Onegin has no interest in the visit, “an eternal prattle about the rain and flax and cattle” (I), but he is curious about Olga, whom Lenski is in love with. Seeing the two sisters, Onegin prefers Tatiana for her melancholy. When Lenski goes off with Olga, Onegin politely chats with Tatiana. She is instantly smitten.

Scene two takes place in Tatiana’s bedroom. She impulsively decides to write a love letter to Onegin. In the novel, it is clear that Tatiana is sincere and innocent, propelled by the heat of the moment. In her monologue, she sings dialogue quoted from her letter. Concerning Onegin, one of her questions stands out:

‘Who are you?’ My guardian angel
or a wily tempter? (Act 1, Scene 2)

This is our first extended exposure to Anna Netrebko. I found her curiously inert in the letter scene. Her voice is gorgeous as usual but she doesn’t convey the newly found passion of this young adolescent girl. Instead, she scribbles and throws off paper after paper. I thought her acting throughout the opera flat.

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Lenski and Olga in the ballroom scene

In scene three, Tatiana is waiting for Onegin. In the novel, it is several days until he shows. Onegin (in the novel) is momentarily moved by Tatiana's grace and innocence, but that passes. Onegin is straightforward in telling Tatiana who he is.

No matter how much I loved you,
habit would kill that love. (Act 1, Scene 3)

Onegin falls on the far side of habit. Tatiana is humiliated. Onegin leaves with this advice:

Learn to control your feelings; ...
... Not everyone will understand you as I do.
Inexperience leads to disaster! (Act 1, Scene 3)

I had some difficulty in this production with Onegin's tone as he delivers his message. He is paternal and kind. Yet this is not his character. I would have preferred the hint of a sneer or at least irony. In this production, Onegin gives Tatiana an erotic kiss before he departs. Here, I think, is his sadism, a kind of tease.

Act Two, Scene One takes place some months later at a ball at the Larin's house. It is Tatiana's name day. She has not seen Onegin since his rejection. The scene opens with Tatiana dancing with Onegin and Lenski with Olga. Why are they dancing together? Another tease? Onegin is bored and gets angry with Lenski. Onegin proceeds



Lenski waiting for Onegin in the duel

to dance and flirt with Olga, while Lenski gets more and more jealous. She is annoyed with his jealousy and refuses Lenski to dance with Onegin again. Onegin further antagonizes Lenski by calling him a Childe Harold. Childe Harold's Pilgrimage is a narrative poem written by Lord Byron, published between 1812 and 1818. Childe Harold is a world-weary young man who, disillusioned with a life of pleasure and revelry, looks for distraction in foreign lands. Obviously, Onegin intended this reference as an insult. Lenski becomes filled with jealousy and rage; he loses control and challenges Onegin to a duel. I believe Onegin realizes that he went too far and tries to cool the situation:

... I've trifled too thoughtlessly.
Loving the youth with all my heart,
I should have shown myself (Act 1, scene 3)

Onegin's desire to hurt Tatiana is evident in her cry:

I am tormented
by pangs of jealousy! (Act 1, scene 3)

Finally, Onegin gets mad:

Enough!
I have heard you out: you're mad, you're mad!
And you shall be taught a lesson! (Act 1, scene 3)

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Onegin holding Lenski after he killed him

The duel takes place in Scene Two. It is an effective scene with its pre-dawn lighting and the voices of both men in high form. Lenski has engaged a well-known duelist, Zaretski, as his second. Onegin shows his contempt for the process in three ways. He oversleeps and arrives late. He is eating a piece of bread when he arrives. Lastly, he does not bother to engage a second and arrives with his servant Guillot. Zaretski is insulted and does not offer the usual chance to stop the duel. In the duel itself, Onegin fires first and kills Lenski.

In the novel but not the opera, Olga goes on to marry another but Tatiana continues to brood about Onegin. Her family takes her to Moscow to find a suitable match. At a ball, she catches the eye of a “fat general” (7, LIV) who turns out to be Prince Gremin. Onegin was haunted by the death of Lenski

In Act three, scene one we open with a ball-room scene. Onegin has returned to St. Peterburg. Couples are dancing the Pollonaise. We see Onegin in the corner:

I'm bored here too.
The brilliance and bustle of society
cannot dispel my constant
world weariness!
Having killed my best friend in a duel,
having no aim, no work,
I have reached the age of twenty six
wearied by the idleness of leisure;
without employment, wife or occupation,
I've found nothing to which I could devote myself!
Restlessness held me in thrall,
the desire for constant change of scene, (Act 3, scene 1)

He has just returned from years of foreign wandering. He is ignored and stubbed by the nobility. In defiance, he grabs a bottle of champagne and drinks. He is now an outcast. Onegin sees Prince Gremin enter with a beauti-



Onegin in the Act 3 ball

ful woman whom he recognizes as Tatiana. Gremin tells Onegin that she is his wife and sings an aria of love for Tatiana. Tatiana and Onegin meet. She is secretly agitated but feigns tiredness and leaves with Gremin. Onegin is instantly in love:

But what's the matter with me?
I must be dreaming!
What is stirring in the depths
of my cold and slothful heart?
Vexation, vanity or, once again,
that preoccupation of youth – love?
Alas, there's no doubt, I'm in love,
in love like a boy, a passionate youth! (Act 3, scene 1)

In the novel, Onegin writes a letter to Tatiana, parallel to the letter she once wrote him and she does not reply to that or several subsequent letters. He finally goes to her house unannounced and finds her alone. In the opera, the scene is Prince Gremin's drawing room. In this production, Onegin and Tatiana meet outdoors in the snow. Tatiana reveals that he has “reawakened my dormant passion” (scene two) but now it is her turn to lecture Onegin. She admits that she still loves him. Onegin wants her to run away with him but she chooses habit over happiness. She leaves and Onegin is shattered.

V. A psychoanalytic Interpretation

What is the character of Onegin? N calls him a fop and a dandy. Fop can be defined as a foolish person, a conceited person, or one who is foolishly attentive to and vain of his appearance (OED). A dandy is one who dresses

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Tatiana at the Act 3 ball

elegantly and fashionable (OED).

I would hold that Onegin is a brilliant portrayal of a narcissistic personality.

I describe patients with narcissistic personalities as presenting excessive self-absorption usually coinciding with a superficially smooth and effective social adaptation, but with serious distortions in their internal relationships with other people. They present various combinations of intense ambitiousness, grandiose fantasies, feelings of inferiority, and overdependence on external admiration and acclaim. Along with feelings of boredom and emptiness, and continuous search for gratification of strivings for brilliance, wealth, power and beauty, there are serious deficiencies in their capacity to love and to be concerned about others. ..Chronic uncertainty and dissatisfaction about themselves, conscious or unconscious exploitiveness and ruthlessness towards others are also characteristics of these patients. ... I stress the presence of chronic, intense envy, and defences against such envy, particularly devaluation, omnipotent control and narcissistic withdrawal, as major characteristics of their emotional life (Kernberg, 1974, p. 215).

In his dandy phase, Onegin is preoccupied with his social status and his appearance. He lives only to be admired and to seduce women. He is socially skilled and well liked in his social set. He knows just enough to impress but has no depth, deep learning or understanding. He is in constant motion for admiration and acclaim. This phase mutates into a stage of boredom, where a sense of emptiness predominates. His lack of genuine connections to his own deeper feelings and relationships with others is much clearer. In his fantasies about his uncle, one can



Onegin and Tatiana in the final scene

see his disdain and ability to exploit others for his own gain.

I would like to examine Onegin's relationship with Lenski more closely. He is the opposite of Onegin, romantic, happy, optimistic, pining for an intimate relationship, "the charm of grave simplicity" (2, IX). Like Onegin, he shunned the everyday social life of the rural district. He and Onegin soon became became the closest of friends.

At first, because of mutual disparity,
they found each other dull;
then liked each other; then
met riding every day on horseback,
and soon became inseparable. (2, XIII)

Onegin did not share in the poet's romantic feelings but was tolerant of them:

...foolish of me to interfere
with his brief rapture;
without me just as well that time will come;
let him live in the meantime
and believe in the world's perfection (2, XV)

Onegin secretly despised Lenski and felt condescending toward him (2, XV).
Onegin was curious about Lenski's romantic fantasies and soon learned of his love for Olga.

sometimes we like to listen

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to the tumultuous language of another's passions,
and it excites our heart; (2, XVIII)

What is Onegin attracted to in Lenski. Lenski has what Onegin is missing, a full range of feelings and a wish to connect. Onegin may disdain such feelings consciously but underneath is drawn to them. Behind the contempt is envy and the wish to possess what one does not have, the exciting of our heart. Onegin asks to be introduced to Olga; he anticipates the boredom of the rural family but is curious about Lenski's love. There are hints both of feeling deserted and a sense of rivalry in love.

We move to the ballroom scene (Act 2, scene 1). Onegin is quite solitary but will see Lenski for dinner and wine, his only companion. Lenski invites Onegin to Tatiana's name day celebration and he accepts. Onegin is annoyed at being at the Larins and he is annoyed at seeing Tatiana and her passion for him. He quickly decided to get revenge on Lenski in as fantasy of triumph (5, XXXI). In the opera, we get a slightly different version. He is annoyed about gossip about him and Tatiana:

There's public opinion for you! I've heard
more than enough of this repulsive
tittle tattle! It serves me right,
all his! Why did I ever come
to this stupid ball? Why?
I won't forgive Vladimir
This service! I'll
flirt with Olga ...
That'll make him mad! (Act 2, scene 1)

What is his motivation? He actually has no attachment to Tatiana, other than annoyance of her interest in him; his real love interest is Lenski. There is anger at Lenski's attachment to Olga and envy of his ability to love while he cannot. Here we see Onegin's narcissistic rage and fantasies of revenge.

Onegin, chuckling secretly,
goes up to Olga, rapidly with her
twirls near the guests,
then seats her on a chair,
proceeds to speak of this and that;
a minute or two having lapsed, then
again with her he goes on waltzing;
all in amazement are. (5, XLI)

Lenski quickly becomes enraged and quite wounded:

Lenski has not the strength to bear the blow;
cursing the pranks of women,
he leaves, demands a horse,
and gallops off. A brace of pistols,
two bullets – nothing else –



shall in a trice decide his fate. (5, XLV)

In the opera, the scene between Onegin and Lenski is drawn out. Onegin calls Lenski a Child Harold for standing around, knowing he is angry. Lenski sarcastically calls him a fine friend; Onegin notes he is sulking. Lenski responds accurately:

Obviously, Tatyana is not enough
for you. Out of love for me,
you evidently want to ruin Olga,
upset her peace of mind, and then
have a good laugh at her expense!
Oh, how admirable!... (Act 2, scene 1)

Here is both the love and the jealousy. Onegin wants to stop the duel but what prevents him is public opinion, "the whisper, the snickering of fools". (6, XI). When the two men meet for the duel, they stand back to back waiting for the signal to begin. In the opera, they sing a duet together of love and friendship:

Enemies! Is it long since the thirst
for blood drove us apart?
Is it so long since we shared everything,
our meals, our thoughts, our leisure,
as friends together? Now in anger,

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like hereditary enemies,
we silently and coldbloodedly
prepare to destroy each other.
Oh, should we not burst out laughing
before we stain our hands with blood,
and should we not part friends? (Act 2, scene 2)

It is Lenski's death that is the most important to Onegin:

Where an ensanguined shade
daily appeared to him (8, XIII)

If Lenski is Onegin's real love object, what about Tatiana? When Onegin replies to Tatiana's love letter, he gives an accurate appraisal of himself.

habit would kill that love...
One cannot return to dreams and youth,
I cannot renew my soul! (Act 1, Scene 3)

He means to be kind but he has no idea what Tatiana could really feel. He has no idea of her passion or her humiliation. Then he says he could love her like a brother. This sounds unlikely and meant to put her off. His treatment of both Olga and Tatiana in the ball-room scene shows how little women have any meaning for him. He humiliates Tatiana and uses Olga to get at Lenski. His return to St. Petersburg and reuniting with Tatiana is conventionally seen as a type of conversion. Now he understands the love once offered and he now misses. This reading, I believe, is not consistent with his narcissistic personality. I think Tatiana's judgement is much more plausible:

you didn't find me attractive. Why, then,
do you pursue me now?
Why am I the object of such attentions?
Could it be because I now
frequent the highest circles,
because I am rich and of the nobility,
because my husband, wounded in battle,
enjoys, on that account, the favour of the court?
Could it not be that my disgrace
would now be generally remarked
and would confer upon you
the reputation of a seducer?

What attracts Onegin to Tatiana is what has always attracted him, to have power over women, to humiliate, to be seen as powerful.

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