



## **The Genre “Novel in Verse” & Alexander Pushkin’s “Eugene Onegin”**

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### **Abstract**

The present paper delves into the emergence of genre “Novel in Verse” or “Verse Novel” in Russian Literature. It was introduced by Alexander Pushkin, the most famous literary figure of 19th Century Russian literature, a period considered as its Golden Era. A. Pushkin is revered not only as the father of modern Russian language, by enriching it & winning the respect it deserved but also as the founder of modern Russian literature for his realistic works. This paper is an attempt to understand and study: contribution of Pushkin in the development of the genre “Novel in Verse” in the form of his Lyrical-Epic work called “Eugene Onegin”; his poetic invention in the form of new stanza writing which became famous as “Onegin Stanza”, its influence on writings of other poets, writers all over the world and which made him the undisputed master of poetry.

**Keywords:** Novel-in-Verse, Pushkin, Onegin, Genre, Poetry, Stanza

The Genre “Verse Novel” is a distinct modern form of the verse narratives with the major verse novels of the beginning of 19th century being Byron's “Don Juan” (1818–24), “Eugene Onegin” (1831) by Alexander Pushkin and “Pan Tadeusz” (1834) by Adam Mickiewicz. These works employ an informal, colloquial register. (Greene, Roland et. al., Verse Novel)

The earlier long classical verse narratives had no specific versification or any prescribed meter. They could be written in blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter) or complex stanza forms, including terza rima (ABA BCB CDC etc.) and ottava rima (ABABABCC), but the stanza most specifically associated with the modern verse novel is the “Onegin stanza” or “Pushkin Sonnet”, invented by Pushkin in his iconic Lyrical-Epic entitled “Eugene Onegin”. His innovation is similar to the Shakespearean sonnet, retaining the 14-line stanza with three quatrains plus couplet structure but Pushkin made it distinct in two ways (Remnyova M. L. et al., 3.1.8.)

Firstly, the meter was reduced to iambic tetrameter and a distinct rhyme scheme was applied: the first quatrain is cross-rhymed (ABAB), the second couplet-rhymed (CCDD), and the third arch-rhymed (or chiasmic, EFFE), so that the whole is ABABCCDDEFFEGG.



Secondly, Pushkin’s sonnet requires that the first rhyme in each couplet (the A, C, and E rhymes) be unstressed (or "feminine"), and all others stressed (or "masculine"). Thus, in the rhyme scheme ‘aBaBccDDDeFeFGG’, the lowercase letters represent feminine rhymes while the uppercase letters represent masculine rhymes. Pushkin’s “Eugene Onegin” comprises of total 5,446 lines with almost whole of 389 fourteen-line stanzas are of iambic tetrameter with this innovative distinct and specific rhyme scheme known as the "Onegin stanza" or the "Pushkin sonnet". In original Russian, rhyme and rhythm come out beautifully as Russian is a very musical language. Among its numerous English translations V. Nabokov’s translation is considered best but Nabokov preferred literal sense to rhyme but in order to study “Onegin Stanza, the following example is analysed from A. Pushkin’s “Eugene Onegin”, Chapter One, Stanza One. English Translation is by A. S. Kline published in 2009:

Line	Onegin Stanza (14 lines)	Pushkin’s innovative Rhyme scheme (feminine & masculine / unstressed & stressed)
(1)	My uncle, what a worthy man,	{a}
(2)	Falling ill like that, and dying;	{B}
(3)	It summons up respect, one can	{a}
(4)	Admire it, as if he were trying.	{B}
(5)	Let us all follow his example!	{c}
(6)	But, God, what tedium to sample	{c}
(7)	That sitting by the bed all day,	{D}
(8)	All night, barely a foot away!	{D}
(9)	And the hypocrisy, demeaning,	{e}
(10)	Of cosseting one who’s half alive;	{F}
(11)	Puffing the pillows, you contrive	{e}
(12)	To bring his medicine unsmiling,	{F}
(13)	Thinking with a mournful sigh,	{G}
(14)	“Why the devil can’t you die?”	{G}

In a letter written to his friend P. Vyazemsky, Pushkin wrote about the Genre Verse Novel: “...I am now writing not a novel but Novel in Verse – which are two extremes. Something like Don Juan – can’t even imagine getting it printed; I am writing it in a slipshod manner”. This shows that while penning down the beginning chapters of “Eugene Onegin”, Pushkin was under clear influence of Byron and he understood well that it will be difficult to publish the work due to censorship imposed by the Czar himself. (Archangelsky, A. Lectures)

The basic difference between a novel in prose and in verse can be understood in the following diagram:

Novel	
In verse	In Prose
Definite lyrical initiation; author’s image or	The compositional center is the narrative



profile is the compositional center of the novel	about the events and characters.
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The Onegin Stanza allows the author to express narrative, colloquial, lyrical intonation, dialogues between characters, and together with this creates an effect of improvisation. Almost whole of “Eugene Onegin” Pushkin wrote using his innovation “Onegin’s stanza”, except Tatyana’s letter, Onegin’s letters and songs sung by girls.

In order to further understand and study the genre “Novel in Verse”, it’s important to know about Pushkin’s work “Eugene Onegin” in brief. The novel covers events in Russia from 1819 till 1825: from foreign campaigns of Russian army after defeating Napoleon till the Decembrist uprising. These were the years of development of Russian society during the reign of Alexander the First. This work in real sense is an encyclopedia of Russian life of the 20’s of the 19th century, as the vast corpus of themes, details of day-to-day life, presence of multiple plots in its composition, depth in which characters are described, even now truly demonstrate the features of life of the given epoch in Russia (Golovenchenko, Chapter 8-9). Many great literary figures from time to time have given their commentaries on this work, including V. Belinsky, V. Nabokov, N. Brodsky, Yu. Lotman, S. Bondi. In Russian Literature “Eugene Onegin” laid the foundation of structure of Russian classical novel and embodies typical national characters.

The novel comprises eight chapters. The composition of the novel in verse is clear and well-planned. The main idea of the work is to assess a typical modern young man who does not find a deserving place in nobility society as he could not compromise with its values which seemed to him unworthy and petty. As a result such young people felt misfit in the contemporary society.

The main plot of the work is the love story of Eugene Onegin and Tatyana Larina. The novel is infact built on a mirror image of the main plot. First, Tatyana falls in love with Onegin and in the end Onegin is in love with Tatyana. The beginning of the plot is their first meeting in the house of Larin family where Onegin was a chance visitor as he just wanted to have a look at his friend Lensky’s fiancée, Olga. Although the scene of their first meeting is not described by Pushkin but Onegin and Lensky discuss it while returning home from the Larin’s party. Olga and Tatyana are sisters and among them Onegin immediately notices Tatyana’s unusual looks and Olga’s mediocrity (Chapter 3, Stanza 5), Onegin asks Lensky:

“And tell me, which was Tatyana?”  
 ‘The one who sat by the window,  
 Sad as Zhukovsky’s Svetlana,  
 As though she had a private sorrow’  
 ‘Can you really love the younger?’  
 – Why not? – Well, I’d prefer her sister,  
 If I were a poet, as you are  
 Olga’s less alive by far,…” (Kline A. S., Chapter 3)



“...In solitude her heart was burning,  
Crushed by adolescent gloom,  
Her soul was waiting...but for whom?

...

The one awaited...he is here;  
Her eyes are opened, it is he!  
Now night and day he will appear...” (Kline A. S., Chapter 3)

There are two culmination points in the main plot, first one is when Onegin meets Tatyana in the garden and coldly rejects her innocent love. Tatyana loses all hope of being happy again but she matures through her experiences in the aristocratic society and during their meeting after her marriage she even does not blame Onegin for his refusal (Chapter 8, Stanza 43):

“Eugene, I was so much younger,  
And prettier then, too, no doubt,  
And I loved you; ah, what answer,  
Issued from your heart’s redoubt?  
What reply? A harsh rejection.  
Is it not so? That girl’s affection,  
Was no surprise: so simple, true?  
I freeze – my God! – to think of you,  
That heartless icy look of yours,  
Lecturing me, so fiercely...yet,  
You bear no blame. I can’t forget,  
You acted rightly, in my cause,  
And played an honourable role,  
I thank you now, with all my soul...” (Kline A. S., Chapter 8)

The second culmination of the main plot happens when Onegin and Tatyana meet again after several years of the first meeting. Now Tatyana has morphed into a beautiful high society woman who still loves Onegin but refuses to entertain his passionate advances and scandalous proposal which in turn makes Onegin lose all hope for happiness. In Chapter 8, Stanza 47, Tatyana says:

“Then happiness seemed possible,  
So near! ...But now my destiny  
Is carved in stone, immutable.

...

I love you (why should I pretend?)  
And yet, I am another’s now,  
And will be faithful to my vow.” (Kline A. S., Chapter 8)



Besides the main plot of Onegin-Tatyana's love story, there is a collateral plot which is the story of friendship between Onegin and Lensky. The second plot begins with both getting acquainted and quickly becoming close friends in the background of village life they are forced to live in. The culmination point of the second plot is the unsuitable behavior of Onegin at the Tatyana Name day party where he tries to seduce Olga with the aim of offending Lensky. The second plot's denouement is the duel fought between Onegin and Lensky. The event simultaneously is also the culmination as it shook up Onegin for the first time in his life. In Chapter 6, Stanza 35, Pushkin writes:

"...Still clutching his pistol, tightly,  
Gripped by feelings of remorse,  
Eugene stares down at Lensky,  
'Well?' says Zaretsky, with force.  
'Killed!'...And with that stark reply,  
Onegin shudders, turns, gives a cry  
Summons the servant for assistance..." (Kline A. S., Chapter 6)

Together with the main and collateral plot there is the third secondary plot – short love story of Lensky and Olga. Here, Pushkin skips the beginning of the plot as they fell in love long back and are already engaged to be married. The culmination of this plot is when Onegin seduces Olga at Tatyana's Name Day Ball. Olga reveals her character of being a vain, selfish and an empty coquette as she doesn't understand how much by her behaviour she was hurting her future husband Lensky which leads to duel between Onegin and Lensky in which Lensky gets killed by Onegin. Lensky's death concludes two Plot lines, one – friendship between Onegin and Lensky, while other one being – love story of Lensky and Olga.

All the three plots are intertwined and although the plots in the novel are simple but its composition is extremely complex. The beginning of the main plot occupies almost two full chapters as Pushkin wanted to tell the reader about his characters and their behavior in detail so as to express the main idea of the novel – a story of an intelligent but useless person, living his life in vain. The main plot doesn't have conclusion, as after Onegin and Tatyana's explanations, she leaves her room with Onegin keeps standing there, completely shocked by her refusal. Pushkin intentionally finished his novel in verse abruptly, a justified move as "a life without aim and thus, a novel without ending".

Pushkin writes in Chapter Eight, Stanza 48:

"She left, yet still Eugene stood there,  
As if a lightning bolt had struck.  
His heart the tempest now stripped bare,  
And with what storms his body shook!  
But now a clink of spurs, and here  
Tatyana's husband looms near,  
So, Reader, in that sorry state,  
I leave my hero, to his fate:



The reader keeps guessing what happens when Tatyana's husband finds Onegin in her room. What does he make out of it, whether Tatyana's husband challenge Onegin to duel, whether Onegin will get killed in duel. Pushkin built the composition of the novel in the form of a circle. Onegin's handling of his life, his relationships of love and friendship, his immoral behavior which makes people suffer, closed circle of his life by not being able to find any aim, so it seems that all his past might be repeated with him too.

The composition of Eugene Onegin is further made unique by the presence of episodes which are inserted by Pushkin and do not have any direct connection to the development of the plot, like, Tatyana's dream, Lensky's poems, songs sung by girls, and ofcourse, numerous lyrical digressions.

In "Novel in Verse" genre lyrical and epic are represented equally which allows the author to easily shift from narration to lyrical digression. The work is as if written in front of the reader and it changes while having a dialogue with life. In "Eugene Onegin" the epic part is the plot, while lyrical is the author's relation to the plot, characters, even the reader which is expressed through numerous occasions of lyrical digression (Greene R. et. al., Verse Novel).

Among the lyrical digression, one finds the presence of author in all the scenes of the plot by giving his commentaries, elucidations, opinion and assessment. Author, as we said is the lyrical centre of narration in Verse Novel. This provides a unique feature to the work's composition, an author who appears before the reader in three ways:

- author who is also a character;
- author who is a narrator;
- author who is a lyrical hero who is telling about himself, his opinion, outlook, emotional experiences, his life.

Like in his poetic introduction to "Eugene Onegin", Pushkin directly addresses his readers:

"...Such as they are, view these extremes  
These varied chapters in your hand,  
With fond indulgence; witty, tragic,  
The casual, the idealistic,  
The fruit of carefree hours, unplanned,  
Insomnia, pale inspiration,  
Unripe powers, or fading art,  
The intellect's cold observation,  
The bitter record of the heart.

...

Friends of Ruslan and Ludmila,

Here without an ounce of bother,

Meet my hero of romance,

Before you, let him now advance....” (Kline A. S., Chapter 1)



Ideally, a novel as an epic work requires its author to detach himself from the described events together with objectivity in their evaluation. The poetic form reinforces the lyrical beginning which is connected with the personality of its creator. Thus, “Eugene Onegin” is considered as Lyrical-Epic work with characteristics of both the genres and in fact carries in itself two worlds –

- first one, a world of “epic” heroes (Onegin, Tatyana, Lensky and other characters), like Pushkin introduces Lensky:

“Meanwhile another landowner

Newly arrived on his estate,

His neighbour, caused an equal stir,

For reasons that I’ll indicate.

Vladimir Lensky, is the man

Handsome, young, a Kantian,

Whose soul was formed in Göttingen,

A friend of truth: a poet then...” (Kline A. S., Chapter 1)

Similarly, telling about Tatyana, in whom Pushkin sees pure Russian soul, he writes in Chapter 5, Stanza 4:

“Tatyana (Russian through and through,

Herself not certain of the reason)

Loved that cold perfection too,

Loved Russia in the winter season...” (Kline A. S., Chapter 5)

And second one, the world of the author depicted in lyrical digressions. This is exactly a trait which differentiates a prose novel from the Verse Novel.

The author’s presence is everywhere in “Eugene Onegin”. It seems Pushkin takes the reader by hand on a journey through the plot, introducing his characters, giving commentaries on their character, behavior, relation with each other, inner feelings, always explaining their inner struggle. In the beginning chapters, author’s voice carries a shade of irony and fun, but in the following chapters, starting from the fifth chapter written after 14<sup>th</sup> December 1825 his voice acquires more serious tone and reticence, about which Pushkin himself writes in 5<sup>th</sup> chapter, 40<sup>th</sup> stanza:

“... In your traces: now youth’s done,

No more of error and distraction,

Now I must take to sounder reasoning;

And as it ends, with this confession,

Free Chapter Five from more digression.” (Kline A. S., Chapter 5)

In the concluding chapters of “Eugene Onegin” author’s voice becomes melancholic and dramatic. In the last chapter, when Onegin comes to Tatyana’s house to ask for her reply to his confession of love to her, she refuses to accept his love, she leaves the room and Tatyana’s husband appears at the door – is where the novel ends. In Stanza 48, Pushkin writes:

“She left, yet still Eugene stood there,  
As if a lightning bolt had struck.  
His heart the tempest now stripped bare,  
And with what storms his body shook!  
But now a clink of spurs, and here  
Tatyana’s husband looms near,  
So, Reader, in that sorry state,  
I leave my hero, to his fate:  
I must abandon him for now.  
For long? ...Forever...” (Kline A. S., Chapter 8)

Another aspect of author’s presence in “Eugene Onegin” we see Pushkin telling about himself, his life, his poetic autobiographical digression from the plot. Each chapter reflects upon the spiritual and biographical details of author which include his location at the time of writing that particular chapter. So, Pushkin’s novel in verse becomes a diary from which we not only find out about the characters of the novel but also a lot about the author himself. Some feel that Pushkin and Onegin are same, but it’s not true, they do have many things in common but they differ in their views about love, nature, poetry, literature in general. What makes them different is that Onegin remained in his life a lost soul, couldn’t find his aim in life but Pushkin found his purpose in poetry. For Onegin, love was just “The science of the tender passion” while Pushkin writes about his views on love:

“All poets, it seems to me,  
Love in imagination,  
To dream affection constantly  
Was once my sole preoccupation.” (Kline A. S., Chapter 1)

About their different views on literature, Pushkin writes about Onegin:

“He lacked the passion and desire  
To give his life for poetry,  
Despite all efforts, or aspire  
To tell iambic from trochee.” (Kline A. S., Chapter 1)

Pushkin himself clearly mentions that he is not Onegin! Pushkin writes in Chapter One, Stanza 56:

“...That Onegin is not me, recall

It, lest some sly, caustic reader,  
Some tell-tale, or vile inventor  
Of over-elaborate slander try  
To pair Yevgeny and I, ..." (Kline A. S., Chapter 1)



Together with this Pushkin on many occasions talks about literature, poets, classicism, romanticism, composition and plot of his novel in verse, like in the following stanzas from Chapter One, Pushkin himself talks about composition of his work, censorship, his critics who point out to some weaknesses in his work and fate of his novel (Archangelsky A., Lectures):

"I've sketched the underlying plan,  
The hero's name I've given too;  
My rhyming novel's well in hand,  
I'm ready now for chapter two.  
I've scanned the pages of my fiction,  
And though they're filled with contradiction,  
It's not my job to work them through.  
The censors must have work to do.  
...  
My newborn work, my sweet creation,  
Earn me the first fruits of fame,  
Noise, incomprehension, blame!  
...  
My verse may touch someone's heart,  
Some stanza, preserved by fate,  
Some fragment of my precious art,  
Saved from Lethe's darkened spate." (Kline A. S., Chapter 1)

This year is the 221<sup>st</sup> Birth Anniversary of Alexander Pushkin and he still remains the undisputed master of Russian poetry, especially of the genre Verse Novel and has inspired generations of poets all over the world, including Mikhail Lermontov, his contemporary writer who used "Pushkin Sonnet" or "Onegin Stanza" in his poetic work published in 1838 "Tambov Treasurer's Wife" (Remnyova M. L. et. al., 3.1.8.), and in India, poet and novelist Vikram Seth whose first novel "The Golden Gate" (1986) is a novel in verse and has been composed using Onegin stanzas and was inspired by Charles Johnston's translation of Pushkin's "Eugene Onegin". I would like to conclude with Pushkin's words from the last chapter of "Eugene Onegin, Stanza 49:

"Reader, whoever you may be,  
Friend or foe, it matters naught,  
Let us part now amicably,  
Farewell. Whatever it was you sought,  
In this casual set of verses:

Some wild past your heart rehearses,

Or perhaps a pleasant rest,

A glimpse of life, or a jest,

Or some mistake grammatical,

God grant you found a trifle here,

To raise a smile, provoke a tear,

Prompt a dream, or article;

Something of what these stanzas tell.

And so we part, again farewell!"

(Kline A. S., Chapter 8)



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