

EUGENE ONEGIN

Alexander Pushkin

After a fine career, his father
had only debts on which to live.
He gave three balls a year, and rather
promptly had nothing left to give.
Fate saved Evgeny from perdition:
at first Madame gave him tuition,
from her Monsieur took on the child.
He was sweet-natured, and yet wild.
Monsieur l'Abbé, the mediocre,
reluctant to exhaust the boy,
treated his lessons as a ploy.
No moralizing from this joker;
a mild rebuke was his worst mark,
and then a stroll in Letny Park.

We all meandered through our schooling
haphazard; so, to God be thanks,
it's easy, without too much fooling,
to pass for cultured in our ranks.
Onegin was assessed by many
(critical judges, strict as any)
as well-read, though of pedant cast.
Unforced, as conversation passed,
he had the talent of saluting
feliculously every theme,
of listening like a judge-supreme
while serious topics were disputing,
or, with an epigram-surprise,
of kindling smiles in ladies' eyes.

How early he'd learnt to dissemble,
to hide a hope, to make a show
of jealousy, to seem to tremble
or pine, persuade of yes or no,
and act the humble or imperious,
the indifferent, or the deadly serious!
In languid silence, or the flame
of eloquence, and just the same
In casual letters of confession - -
one thing inspired his breath, his heart,

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and self-oblivion was his art!
How soft his glance, or at discretion
how bold or bashful there and here
how brilliant with its instant tear!

How early on he learnt trouble
the heart of the professional flirt!
When out to burst a rival's bubble,
how well he knew the way to hurt - -
what traps he'd set him, with what malice
he'd pop the poison in his chalice!
But you, blest husbands, to the end
you kept your friendship with our friend:
the subtle spouse was just as loyal - -
Faublas' disciple for an age - -
as was the old suspicious sage,
and the majestic, antlered royal,
always contended with his life,
and with his dinner, and his wife.

Some days he's still in bed, and drowzes,
when little notes come on a tray.
What? Invitations? Yes, three houses
have each asked him to a soirée:
a ball here, there a children's party;
where shall he go, my rogue, my hearty?
Which one comes first? It's just the same
to do them all is easy game.
Meanwhile, attired for morning strolling
complete with broad-brimmed bolivar,
Eugene attends the boulevard,
and there at large he goes patrolling
until Bréguet's unsleeping chime
advises him of dinner-time.

He mounts the sledge, with daylight fading:
"Make way, make way," goes up the shout;
his collar in its beaver braiding
glitters with hoar-frost all about.
He's flown to Talon's calculating
that there his friend Kaverin's waiting;
he arrives - - the cork goes flying up,
wine of the Comet fills the cup;
before him roast beef, red and gory,
And truffles, which have ever been
youth's choice, the flower of French cuisine:

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and pâté, Strasbourg's deathless glory,
sits with Limburg's vivacious cheese
and ananas, the gold of trees.

More wine, he calls, to drench the flaming
fire of the cutlets' scalding fat,
when Breguet's chime is heard proclaiming
the new ballet he should be at.
He's off - - this ruthless legislator
for the footlights, this fickle traitor
to all the most adored actresses,
this denizen of the coulisses
that world where every man's a critic
who'll clap an entrechat, or scoff
at Cleopatra, hiss her off,
boo Phaedra out as paralytic,
encore Moena, - - and rejoice
to know the audience hears his voice.

The house is packed out; scintillating,
the boxes; boiling, pit and stalls;
the gallery claps - - it's bored with waiting - -
and up the rustling curtain crawls.
Then with a half-ethereal splendour,
bound where the magic bow will send her,
Istómina, thronged all around
by Naiads, one foot on the ground,
twirls the other slowly as she pleases,
Then suddenly she's off, and there
she's up and flying through the air
like fluff before Aeolian breezes;
she'll spin this way and that, and beat
against each other swift, small feet.

Applause, Onegin enters - - passes
across the public's toes; he steers
straight to his stall, then turns his glasses
on unknown ladies in the tiers;
he's viewed the boxes without passion,
he's seen it all; with looks and fashion
he's dreadfully dissatisfied;
to gentlemen on every side
he's bowed politely; his attention
wanders in a distracted way
across the stage; he yawns: "Ballet - -
they all have richly earned a pension,"

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he turns away: "I've had enough --
now even Didelot's tedious stuff."