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NARRATIVE TRANSFORMATIONS OF ALEXANDER PUSHKIN'S *EUGENE ONEGIN* IN TRANSCULTURAL DIGITAL SPHERE

ABSTRACT: This paper analyses the strategies of narrative interpretations of the classical literature in Russian and English fanfiction. The essay draws upon the fanfiction based on Alexander Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*. To clarify and classify the algorithms of transformation of Russian classical "novel in verse" we use the theory of *modèle actantiel* by A.J. Greimas. English-speaking fic-writers more often than Russian-speaking readers use the two-actantial model instead of the four-actantial one as in the original meta-story: they interpret Pushkin's texts using the mass-culture implementations of sentimental or gothic novel genres. Perceiving the novel as a conventional text, Russian-speaking fic-writers radically rework the plot and the style of the original source: e.g. they combine the narrative axes of desire and struggle in the original source, following the "children's anecdote" model typical for Russian folklore. By transferring the classical novel to the digital environment, the narrative features of Pushkin's novel as a text, which are immanent to an experiment with any national artistic and reading tradition, become especially vivid.

KEYWORDS: Interpretation, Actantial model, Fanfiction, Reading tradition, Transcultural communities.

Introduction

Readers of classical literature actively join "a specific institution of interpretation" (*aca fandom*) (Jenkins 1992b, 211) and engage in "an array of sophisticated writing and reading practices" (Black and Steinkuehler 2009, 274) in the Web. The entity of such an active reading is to transform and convert the original texts. The writing of amateur works and online communication between readers are considered by researchers as an "emotional investment in the original story" (Barnes 2015, 75) or the practice of "fan" subculture – *fanfiction*. The interpretation leaves a notable digital trail in the web-archives: there are more than 6,000,000 fanfics on the English-language fanfiction sites *FanFiction* (<https://www.fanfiction.net/>) and *Archive Of Our Own* (<https://www.archiveofourown.org/>); more than 2,000,000 fanfics on the largest Russian-language site *Kniga Fanfikov* (<https://www.ficbook.net/>).

The connection between fanfiction and a source text is the object of the investigation, which describes fan works as a type of literature. Foremost, fanfiction correlates closely with mass literature: “Fans construct their cultural and social identity through borrowing and inflecting mass culture images” (Jenkins 1992a, 23). It allows us to compare fan writing with “formula literature” that has “archetypal story patterns” (Cawelti 2014, 7). Unlike formulaic art, “story patterns” in fanfiction are connected not only with mass literature plots (as well as detective, romance novel, horror that are brightly represented in fan corpora), but also with the source text artistic peculiarities, which are highly recognizable for fan community. Cornel Sandvoss appeals to literary theory, considering the question about the aesthetic value of fanfiction. Both a fan text and its source have a certain degree of intertextuality: “The difference between intertextuality in mediated and literary texts is thus one of degree rather than kind” (Sandvoss 2017, 35). The play with another artistic world is one of the key characteristics of fanfiction as a literature imaginative practice. Describing the structure of fan corpora in general, Abigail Derecho distinguishes the main traits of fanfiction using Derrida’s conception of “archive”: fanfiction as an archive “seeks to always produce more archive, to enlarge itself” (Derecho 2006, 64). This literature archive encompasses both the fanfiction and the original versions of texts: the link between fanfic and preceding texts is conventional for fan-readers and writers.

Fanfiction has some characteristics, which distinguish it from other reading and writing practices. Developing Henry Jenkin’s approach to fanfiction as a “contemporary folk culture” (Jenkins 1992a, 285), Catherine Tosenberger underlines that “fanfiction production is not dissimilar to production of folk narratives”, however fic-writers themselves reject the “obscuring of the individual author that is the hallmark of folklore” (Tosenberger 2014, 23). Therefore, as well as in folklore, in fanfiction it is possible to highlight the common interpretation structures, and also variative and invariative constructions of the original narrative.

Moreover, fanfiction archives unite the carriers of different cultures. Analysing how fic-writers transform the Chinese and British popular movies and books, Bertha Chin and Lori Morimoto reveal transcultural interpretation peculiarities. They proved that “a moment of affinity between the fan and transcultural object” is the driving force for transcultural communities developing (Chin and Morimoto 2013, 104-105). In our essay we suggest that fanfics based on classical literature reflect the national peculiarity of interpretation more vividly compared with texts devoted to mass literature and films.

Methodology

To describe how classical plots were interpreted by readers in their own texts we use the methodology of narrative researches. Bronwen Thomas, discussing three waves of fanfiction researches, makes a full overview of the works, which draw upon narrative theories, and investigate the forms of readers' engaging in an original story. As Thomas notices, the cognitive narratology focusing on the reader's interpretation way can allow us to understand "how readers process narratives and of how storyworlds in turn connect with and 'actualize' all sorts of 'latent' desires and needs" (Thomas 2011, 12). The example of how post-classical narrative theory can supplement our understanding of fan pleasure of the creating of their own fictional worlds based on classical literature is the research by Veerle Van Steenhuyse. The researcher uses Catherine Emmott's concept of "contextual frame" to investigate how "fan readers use the fan fiction text to build up a mental image of a world" of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (Van Steenhuyse 2014, 1.1). Steenhuyse also underlines one of the narrative differences between the original works, which could refer to other texts, and fanfics, describing the concept of "implied reader:" "the implied fan reader is a reader who is able to bring the canon to bear on the fan fiction text" (Van Steenhuyse 2014, 2.1). It allows us to consider that investigating fan works and source texts we also investigate a reader of this text with their own imaginative capacities and peculiarities.

In our work we rely on Greimas's theory of *actantial models*, enabling us to specify readers' interpretation of classical narration comparing the original novel and fan works. Greimas states that narrativity analysis is based on two "autonomous levels": the *actants*, "having to do with narrative syntax," and the *actors*, which are recognizable in "the particular discourses in which they are manifested" (Greimas 1987, 106). The relationships between these levels are the key aspects of our analysis of fanfics based on the classical work. According to Greimas, the actantial roles are underscored by readers themselves in the work perception process: "A character in a novel, supposing that it is introduced by the attribution of a name conferred on it, is progressively, created by consecutive figurative notations extending throughout the length of the text, and it does not exist as a complete figure until the last page, thanks to the cumulative memorizing of the reader" (Greimas 1987, 119). Therefore, producing amateur works, a fic-writer transcribes their reading process and simultaneously investigates "the actantial organization of the 'characters of a story'" (Greimas 1987, 107) in Greimas's terms.

Narrative interpretations of *Eugene Onegin*

The subject of our essay is the readers' interpretation of Alexander Pushkin's novel in verse *Eugene Onegin* in English-speaking and Russian-speaking fanfiction. In online fanfiction archives there is a significant quantitative difference between Russian and English corpora based on *Eugene Onegin*: in August 2020 there are 1213 texts in Russian and only 29 texts in English. We have analysed 23 English and 583 Russian texts written from 2005 to 2019 and published on the archives FanFiction, *Archive of Our Own*, *Kniga Fanfikov*.¹ The average length of Russian and English texts is about the same – 1500-2000 words.

Despite the fact that English-speaking community is much smaller than Russian, the appearance of fanfiction based on *Eugene Onegin* is a new stage in history of Pushkin's interpretations in foreign languages: "In the English-speaking world Pushkin is still less read than Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Chekhov; people usually say that this is because he is impossible to translate" (Chandler 2009, 645). This is impossible to detect which Pushkin's translations are read by fic-writers because there are "more than 40 translations of the novel into English" (Razumovskaya 2014, 841) including the literal translation suggested by Vladimir Nabokov. Trying to determine the main reasons why Pushkin is unpopular in English-language culture, Philip Ross Bullock concludes that in "the first wave of translations of Russian realist fiction into English" "Pushkin simply failed to accord with widespread clichés about the nature of Russian literature and the uses to which it could be put in Britain" (Bullock 2011, 371). In a broad sense *Eugene Onegin* can be perceived by readers as the novel of tricked expectations. Sergei Bocharov notices that possible but not realized narrative lines play the key role in Pushkin's narration (Bocharov 1986, 145). And if Pushkin plays with his readers and their expectations, then fic-writers stay serious, following Pushkin's narrative variations and transforming them.

One of the most popular strategies of narrative transformation of *Eugene Onegin* is the reduction of the four-actantial narration into the two-actantial one. In Russian-speaking and English-speaking communities the difference in usage of the two-actantial model depends on the readers' awareness of the literary, musical and screen adaptations of *Eugene Onegin*. Following Tchaikovsky's opera (2018 [1879]) and Martha Fiennes' film *Onegin* (2000 [1999]), English-speaking and Russian-speaking fic-writers ignore the figure of the Author as "master and creator" of the fiction world (Dvigubski 2013, 23) and his role as the sender. Unlike Russian-speaking fic-writers, English-speaking authors more often denote that their fanfics are based on musical

¹ The archive links are in the footnotes above.

and opera adaptations, they also name Tatyana's husband as "Gremin," like in Tchaikovsky's opera (Uvarov 1963).

English-speaking fic-writers combine the functions of the object, the opponent, and the helper in one actor, or change a character's role throughout a story: one character is the opponent but then this character acts as the helper. This narrative model allows fic-writers to include the motifs of sentimental or gothic literature. The sentimental motif of rewarded virtue organizes the plot where Tatyana and Onegin stay together. For example, fanfic *In the Spring* (Devildream 2018, 69) is divided into two parts. In the first part Onegin acts as the opponent: he ruins Tatyana's virtuous life. The fic-writer retrieves a possible plot of Tatyana's disgrace after her love confession delineated in the original sources: "Perhaps an ancient glow of feelings / possessed him for a minute; / but he did not wish to deceive / an innocent soul's trustfulness./ Now we'll flit over to the garden where Tatiana / encountered him" (Pushkin 1964 [1833], 186). However, in the second part of fanfic, Onegin's motivation is changed: he helps Tatyana avoid the marriage without love, and Tatyana's virtuous feelings are rewarded with a happy marriage with Onegin. In fanfic *Happiness within Our Reach* as well as in the screen version of *Eugene Onegin* (Onegin [1999] 2000) Tatyana, who is the main character and the subject, witnesses Onegin and Lensky's duel. In the fan text Tatyana interrupts the duel and becomes rewarded for it: "he would take the memory of the light in her face with him, through all his journeys, through all his wrestles with himself, till he came home again to her at last" (raspberryyhunter 2018). According to the two-actantial narrative scheme, fic-writers also create fanfics in the genre of epistolary novel or diary (*My Better Half* by Alley_Skywalker 2009, *Tatyana Larina's Diary* by TimeTraveller95 2013) conventional for sentimental literature and ironically repeated in Pushkin's novel in verse (*Tatyana's Letter to Eugene* in French or *Onegin's Letter to Tatyana*).

The actant roles combination of the object, the helper and the opponent is especially vivid in homoerotic fan story: more often Lensky instead of Tatyana acts as Onegin's lover and Onegin acts as the object. In fanfic *Something Money Can't Buy* (Alley_Skywalker 2010) Onegin disputes with Lensky as the opponent, but also helps him to cope with sadness due to the quarrel with Olga. Otherwise in fanfic *Whither are You Banished?* (vass 2010), where Onegin kills Lensky on the duel, Lensky helps Onegin to feel "true love", but he becomes a victim of his own forbidden, unfeasible love: "I could not say: friend, when I taunted / You by dancing with your bride / It was always you I wanted. / So I hid behind my pride / And instead invoked your wrath."

The homoerotic plot versions are connected with Gothic imagery. Fic-writers create an image of Onegin-werewolf, who is simultaneously a villain and a lover that is a typical thematic role for *Gothic villain* (McEvoy 2007b, 7): "The figure of the vampire might be said to collapse the roles of Satan, the

hero, the villain and the victim into one" (McEvoy 2007a, 23). Fic-writers repeat the Gothic "shift in subjectivity", when "the boundary between self and other remains blurred" (Baker 2007, 167): "You monster! I have spoken the word to myself, over and over, since Onegin's return. [...] His mouth is red. I remember the taste of him. Onegin, you have made a monster of me too" (GloriaMundi 2005). In fanfiction Eugene Onegin acts as a vampire who is waiting for invitation to tempt and then murder other characters: "He was a vampire that night, needing to be invited in. 'Come in, then', Lensky said, although he did not move" (bogged 2009). Comparing Onegin with the vampire, a popular in mass culture image, fic-writers also follow the original source and its opera text, in which Tatyana calls Onegin a "tempter" twice (Uvarov 1963, 30-32). Fic-writers use the gothic imagery: mist, fog, dark sky, when they describe the nature around Onegin. It also has a mysterious meaning: so, in the mist characters can die or come to life (*No More Need for Sunrises* by Alley_Skywalker 2010b, *Marche Funèbre* by SashaDerksen 2017, *Whither Are You Banished?* by vass 2010, etc.).

Russian-speaking fic-writers also concentrate on the axis of desire (the subject and the object), but the combination of three narrative roles (the object, the opponent and the helper) in one actor is absent. In both English-language and Russian-language archives fic-writers create a continuation of Eugene Onegin, where Tatyana inspires Onegin with her love and characters stay together or one of them dies. In this sense Russian and English-speaking fic-writers are both close to the screen version of Eugene Onegin (Onegin [1999] 2000), where Tatyana's image acquires the features of the heroine conventional for mass culture, for example, "femme fatale" (Leontovich 2015, 294).

Unlike English-speaking archive, in Russian-speaking texts the homoerotic fanfics occupy a huge part of the corpora. In numbers of fanfic the axes of power and desire are just inverted. If Onegin acts as the subject, the role of the opponent might belong to Olga, who tries to break Lensky's heart: "Dear Eugene! I'm so glad that your behaviour at the ball showed me who Olga really is" (*Akh, ty menya ne lyubish* [Ah, You Don't Love Me] by Temniy knyaz' Gabriel (2018); here and after our transl.). If the subject is Lensky, Tatyana could act as his opponent: for example, in fanfic *Tri kruga Ada* [*Three Circles of Hell*] (Volandamart Drarrimanovich 2019), Lensky scorns Tatyana but helps her with writing the love letter to Eugene. The ideological conflict of Gothic villain underscored by an English-speaking fic-writer is not so important for Russian-speaking readers, who concentrate on explicit conflict and include more characters in their stories. In numbers of fanfics (*Ponevole* [Oblidged] by Scrat 2013, *Vot kak vse jeto bylo* [That's How it Was] by Ta samaja bulochka s koricey 2019, *Chto zhe jeto?* [What is It?] by Fresh 2019) the duel between Onegin and Lensky results in the love confession or resolves the love conflict between Onegin and Lensky. The line of the struggle between Onegin and

Lensky and the line of Onegin's and Tatyana's love are well-known for Russian-speaking readers, so, relying on postreception of classical literature, they summarize two Onegin's situations typical for all Russian novelistic traditions in XIX century (Lotman 1995, 458): the situation of the struggle between two fellows and the situation of unrequited love. Readers of the original text remember that characters are opponents in Pushkin's novel but invert their motivation.

Another strategy of amateur interpretation relates to the axes of transmission and struggle: the figure of the Author acts as the sender or the helper. There are fewer works with this narrative scheme than fanfics with the two-actantial model.

Copying the original narrative style (Onegin's stanza), an English-speaking fic-writers perceive the figure of the Author (Pushkin) as the helper whereas in Pushkin's work the figure of the Author is the sender. In epistolary fanfic "Renewal" (raspberryyhunter 2018b) Onegin-subject is also the sender, Tatyana-object acts as the receiver. The figure of the Author is introduced as Onegin's fellow like in the original text: "Onegin, a good pal of mine" (Pushkin 1964 [1833], 96) – "I also have been spending a bit of time with a fellow I got to know when I was here before" (raspberryyhunter 2018b), but in the fanfic Pushkin also gives Onegin a piece of good advice and helps him. Moreover, the fic-writer notices the ironical style of Pushkin's text and copies it portraying Pushkin-character who is "a cynical, humorous little fellow, who is always making jokes about love". In fan poem *Coaching the Princess: A Zombie Epilogue in Verse* (archea2 2018) the helper of Tatyana is a pumpkin: "An act of love saw to my birth, / an empty hull cast on the earth / for your dear sake, Princess. True!" Pumpkin Pompushka has characteristics of the real author – Alexander Pushkin, who in the fanfic, like in Hoffman's tales (e.g. *Lindhorst in Golden Pot*), is Tatyana's conductor into the world of imagination.

The fairy tale plot in fanfiction is also connected with the scene of Tatyana's fairy tale dream in Pushkin's novel: in prophetic dream Tatyana meets a bear, which accompanies her to Onegin. This scene is absent in the movie adaptation (Onegin 2000 [1999]) and in numbers of fanfics. According to Yuri Lotman's commentary to Eugene Onegin, the image of bear is connected with the "symbolic of matchmaking, marriage in ritual poetry" (Lotman 1995, 655). In fanfics Tatyana is called "Princess" (*It Cannot Be Forever* by Songstress21 2013), she performs fairy tales' rituals ("Pompushka, as good as his claim, / leapt from the sofa to the grate; / snapped a tendril into a flame" archea2 2018). In readers' perception the plot-forming folklore references and the ironical style are difficult to translate and commentary. Fic-writers reproduce them in specific forms: the ironical intonation of the narrator in the original source is transposed to the portrait of the Author-character; folklore plots are connected with literary tales.

In Russian-speaking fanfiction the figure of the Author acts as the sender and the helper, and the receiver is fic-writers community. Fic-writers construct the story where Pushkin-character publishes his novel on online fan archives: “Forgive me, poor Lensky! / I am not happy too: / The ‘yaoy’ cannon reign there / And demand to sacrifice your bottom” (Ikiori 2014). The narrative roles changing organizes a humoristic plot close to children’s sexual humor or the tradition of children’s anecdote. The goal of children’s parody is to deconstruct the “sacred” literary text read by heart at school. But Russian-speaking readers perceive Eugene Onegin not only as the object for parody, but as the model for parodying any literary tradition. For example, in fanfics the sender could also be the character of another Russian novel, historically connected with Pushkin’s novel: for example, Gregory Pechorin the main character from M. Lermontov’s *A Hero of Our Time* is the sender and the subject in fanfic *Nikogda ne zabyt* [Never Forget] (wolkenlos 2012), Alexander Chatsky, the character of A. Griboedov’s comedy *Woe from Wit*, acts the same role in fanfic *Dvenadcat’ bezumnyh chasov* [Twelve Crazy Hours] (Shadoof 2013), and others. In fanfics Onegin wants to avoid the “Russian handra”, and a character from another novel acts as the sender or the donor and gives the “true love” to Onegin: “Onegin thinks, he learned all about him in a second, it wasn’t planned and he dealt with his sadness” (Twice 2012).

Fic-writes notice the parodying nature of Pushkin’s narration, but if Pushkin transforms the contemporary literature, fic-writers recomprehend mass culture or literary practices of fanfiction communities.

Conclusion

Russian-speaking and English-speaking fanfics are created by passing the narrative structure and saving the structure of fabula in the original source. The possibility of such investigation and transformation is due to the variability of the plot in novel itself (Bocharov 1986, 143). English-speaking fic-writers mostly ignore the figure of the narrator and underscore a character as the subject of perception and evaluation of the events. Fic-writers take Tatyana’s point of view: Tatyana can’t read in Russian and is keen on European literature; she is also an active reader, so, she sees herself and Onegin as the characters of sentimental or romantic novel. Creating a sentimental or Gothic story, fic-writers follow Tatyana’s reading preference: “She grew enamoured with the fictions / of Richardson and of Rousseau” (Pushkin 1964 [1833], 143). Tatyana also knows “plain-folk ancience” (Pushkin 1964 [1833], 211). This part of Tatyana’s and Onegin’s identities (Tatyana “being Russian at heart, herself not knowing why”, Pushkin [1833] 1964, 211) is neutralized by English-speaking fic-writers through the two-actantial model with the combination of the object, the opponent and the

helper, close to European tradition of Gothic and sentimental novel, and through the including of the Author-helper. For Russian-speaking fic-writers the comparison of the novel in verse with its historical and cultural context (including digital or mass media context) is more important. That is why Russian-speaking Eugene Onegin fan archive consists of stories with the inverted narration structure or with the four-actantial model: it requires readers to know the variations of “Onegin’s situations” in Russian novelistic tradition. If English-speaking authors ignore folklore references in Eugene Onegin, Russian-speaking readers multiply it.

Both Russian-speaking and English-speaking readers are familiar with the original text or its transmedial adaptations. They perceive Eugene Onegin as the text, open to the adaptation in any cultural tradition. The result of the analyses of the narrative models allows us to agree with the researchers who notice that “the place of Pushkin and his novel Eugene Onegin in the English-speaking space is becoming more and more significant” (Nesterova, Popova 2017, 99). Characters and author are sophisticated readers in Pushkin’s novel and its different adaptations. Such strategy of the active reading and writing inspires and unites the speakers of different languages. That is why in transcultural sphere fic-writers actively implicate their readers’ identity and literature preferences in the texts based on Eugene Onegin.

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