

**SUMMARY** Eugene Onegin, a worldly but arrogant young man, visits the home of two young sisters in the Russian countryside. The older sister, Tatiana, immediately falls in love with him and, in a fit of passion, writes him a letter confessing her feelings. Onegin humiliates Tatiana by refusing her and suggesting that she learn to control her emotions. A few months later, Onegin angers his best friend, the poet Lenski, by idly flirting with Olga, Tatiana’s sister and the object of Lenski’s affection. Onegin and Lenski fight a duel and Lenski is killed.

Several years later, Onegin returns to St. Petersburg after traveling abroad. While at a party, he is introduced to the young wife of Prince Gremin and is shocked to realize that the stylish, beautiful woman is the same Tatiana whose love he once refused. Onegin suddenly realizes that he is indeed in love with Tatiana and later, at the Prince’s palace, asks her to run away with him. Tatiana tells Onegin that while she still loves him, she has made her choice and will not abandon her husband. Onegin is left alone and devastated.

**THE SOURCE: *EUGENE ONEGIN* BY ALEXANDER PUSHKIN** Alexander Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin*, a novel in verse, is one of the most celebrated works in all of Russian literature. It is a wonder of formal innovation as well as a work of stunning social and psychological insight. The witticism of the verse and complicated structure of its rhyme scheme belie the seriousness of the novel’s investigation into the nature of young love and unfulfilled longing.

Tchaikovsky—who was profoundly sensitive to poetry—adapted the novel into an operatic libretto himself, with help from a friend, the amateur poet Konstantin Shilovsky. Some portions of the opera, most notably the famous letter scene, preserve Pushkin’s text in an almost unaltered state. Although the libretto omits large sections of the novel, it remains true to the episodic nature of Pushkin’s narrative: Tchaikovsky called his opera “lyric scenes.”

## SYNOPSIS

**ACT I: *The Larin estate in rural Russia*** Madame Larina listens as her daughters, Tatiana and Olga, sing a song about young lovers meeting in the woods. She reminisces with the girls’ aging nurse, Filippyevna, about bygone years and the romantic ideals of her youth.



## VOICE TYPE

Since the early 19th century, singing voices have usually been classified in six basic types, three male and three female, according to their range:

### SOPRANO

the highest-pitched type of human voice, normally possessed only by women and boys

### MEZZO-SOPRANO

the female voice whose range lies between the soprano and the contralto (Italian “mezzo” = middle, medium)

### CONTRALTO

the lowest female voice, also called an alto

### COUNTERTENOR

a male singing voice whose vocal range is equivalent to that of a contralto, mezzo-soprano, or (less frequently) a soprano, usually through use of falsetto

### TENOR

the highest naturally occurring voice type in adult males

### BARITONE

the male voice lying below the tenor and above the bass

### BASS

the lowest male voice

Their conversation is interrupted by a group of peasants who have finished their daily work and sing for the Larin family. Olga, who has a spirited and flirtatious nature, teases Tatiana, who is quiet and romantic, for living in a dreamland, and prepares excitedly for a visit from her fiancé, the poet Lenski. When Lenski arrives with a friend, Eugene Onegin, Tatiana is immediately taken with the visitor.

Later that night, Tatiana worries Filippyevna with her restlessness. Tatiana assures the nurse she is fine, but stays awake thinking about Onegin. Acting on an impulse, she writes him a letter confessing the true nature of her feelings and enlists Filippyevna's help to deliver it.

When Onegin and Tatiana meet again, he tells her that he was touched by her letter but can only offer her friendship. He warns her to guard her emotions more carefully. Tatiana is humiliated.

**ACT II: *The Larin estate*** A few months later, Lenski and Onegin return to the Larin estate to celebrate Tatiana's name day. Annoyed that Lenski has dragged him to a large party he would rather have avoided, Onegin takes his revenge by flirting brazenly with Olga. Lenski is enraged and challenges Onegin to a duel, ending the party.

While waiting for Onegin to arrive for their duel, Lenski thinks about his poetry, death, and his love for Olga. Onegin arrives late, and although both men would rather avoid violence, their honor compels them to fight. Lenski is shot and killed.

**ACT III: *St. Petersburg*** Several years have passed, and Onegin has returned from traveling abroad. He is bored by his surroundings, lonely, and still consumed with guilt over Lenski's death. At a ball at Prince Gremin's palace, the prince tells his friend Onegin how much joy his young wife has brought into his life. Onegin is stunned to recognize the elegant, confident woman as Tatiana. She is taken aback by Onegin's presence, but greets him politely before quickly leaving the party. Onegin suddenly realizes he is in love with Tatiana.

Onegin writes to Tatiana. When they meet, he asks her to run away with him. Tatiana admits that she still loves Onegin, but tells him that she cannot abandon her husband. She leaves Onegin alone and devastated.

## WHO'S WHO IN *EUGENE ONEGIN*

CHARACTER		PRONUNCIATION	VOICE TYPE	THE LOWDOWN
Tatiana Larina	A young woman from a country estate	ta-TYAH-na	soprano	Tatiana's life has been secluded, and although she is shy and bookish, she is capable of passionate expression and deep attachment.
Eugene Onegin	A young aristocrat	yoo-JEEN oh-NYEH-gin	baritone	Disillusioned and aloof, Onegin is dismissive of the world and people around him. His careless attitude will lead him to tragedy and loss.
Lenski	A young poet and neighbor of the Larin family	LEN-skee	tenor	Lenski is earnest, idealistic, and deeply in love with Olga, Tatiana's sister.
Olga Larina	Tatiana's younger sister	AWL-guh	contralto	More extroverted than her sister, Olga's innocent flirtation with Onegin ultimately leads to tragedy.
Prince Gremin	A wealthy aristocrat	GREH-min	bass	Gremin is surprised to find love late in life, following a career in the army. He is decent and honorable.
Madame Larina	The mother of Tatiana and Olga	LAH-ree-na	mezzo-soprano	Madame Larina wants her daughters to marry well but reminisces about the man she loved before her own arranged marriage.
Filippyevna	The sisters' aging nanny	fil-leep-YEV-nah	mezzo-soprano	Tatiana enlists the loyal Filippyevna's help to deliver her letter to Onegin.

**1731** With a performance on December 11 of *Calandro* by Giovanni Ristori, Russian audiences are first exposed to Italian opera. Before this time, there had been no Russian tradition of opera, and instrumental music was still in an early stage of development in comparison to that of Western Europe.

**1799** Aleksandr Sergeyevich Pushkin is born in Moscow, Russia, to an old, aristocratic family. On his mother's side, he was a descendant of Abram Hannibal, who was abducted from his African family, eventually adopted by Peter the Great, and elevated as a member of the imperial court. Many scholars consider Pushkin to be Russia's greatest poet and the founder of modern Russian literature.

**1823** Pushkin begins work on the verse novel *Eugene Onegin*, which he writes and publishes serially through 1832. A detailed and accurate portrait of aristocratic life in tsarist Russia, it becomes one of the most beloved Russian novels of any age.

**1836** Mikhail Glinka's opera *A Life for the Tsar* premieres at the Bolshoi Theater in St. Petersburg. The work is hailed as the first truly Russian opera, featuring not only a libretto in the Russian language and a story based on the folk hero Ivan Susanin, but the incorporation of folk melodies and other distinctively Russian musical elements.

**1837** After witnessing his wife accept the flirtatious behavior of their acquaintance George d'Anthès, Pushkin receives a letter informing him that he has been elected to "The Most Serene Order of Cuckolds." Pushkin challenges d'Anthès to a duel and is mortally wounded. He dies two days later.

**1840** Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky is born on May 7 near Votkinsk, in rural north-eastern Russia, to a large middle-class family. Tchaikovsky's parents encourage his early musical talent by hiring a tutor and purchasing an orchestrion, a type of organ, for their family home. He is also a precocious student of poetry and writes a number of literary works at a young age.





*1852* Tchaikovsky is sent to St. Petersburg to attend the School of Jurisprudence with the aim of later pursuing a career in law. While there, he continues his musical education privately, attending concerts, performing in choirs, and writing his first musical compositions.

*1859* Upon his graduation from the School of Jurisprudence, Tchaikovsky begins working as a clerk at the Ministry of Justice. He is an avid participant in St. Petersburg's rich cultural life, attending performances of theater, ballet, opera, and amateur theatrical organizations.

*1862* Tchaikovsky matriculates at the newly established St. Petersburg Conservatory, the first academic musical institution in Russia, studying composition, piano, flute, organ, and music theory. As Herman Laroche, one of his classmates at the Conservatory and one of his earliest biographers later claims he told Tchaikovsky, "You are the greatest musical talent in present-day Russia... I see in you the greatest, or, better said, the sole hope of our musical future."

*1866* Tchaikovsky accepts a post to teach music theory at the new Moscow Conservatory. In his personal life, he develops friendships with the homosexuals in his social circle and romantic relationships with a few. Tchaikovsky's homosexuality is known to his family and close friends, and is a frequent topic of discussion in his correspondence. At the time, he believes that he will eventually be able to have a traditional marriage and looks forward to the comfort of family life and children.  
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**1877** During a discussion with Tchaikovsky about potential opera libretti, the singer Yelizaveta Lavrovskaya—a fellow professor at the Conservatory—proposes Pushkin’s verse novel *Eugene Onegin* as a possible source.

While composing at an intense pace, Tchaikovsky is contacted by Antonina Milyukova, a former pupil, who sends him an ardent letter in which she confesses her love for him. Tchaikovsky understands his situation as uniquely similar to that of the characters of *Eugene Onegin*. He and Antonia marry in July; within two weeks, Tchaikovsky leaves her and they separate permanently two months later. His marriage and the resulting psychological turmoil launch the composer into a period of medical crises, restlessness, and writer’s block.

Tchaikovsky continues work on *Eugene Onegin* while convalescing in Switzerland and Italy. He completes the opera in January, despite the difficulties of the past months, within only eight months.

**1879** The opera premieres in March in a production by students from the Moscow Conservatory at the Maly Theater in Moscow.

**1881** *Eugene Onegin* has its first professional production at Moscow’s Bolshoi Theater in January.



Anna and Elena Balbusso's illustration for the cover of a recent edition of *Eugene Onegin* casts the protagonist as an "empty suit."

## THE SUPERFLUOUS MAN

The character of Eugene Onegin served as a model for later generations of writers who created anti-heroes with similar attributes. Like Onegin, these men tend to be aristocratic and intelligent, but bored, disengaged with the world around them, careless and cynical, and inclined to idle activities such as drinking and gambling. Over the course of the 19th century, this kind of character became an archetype particular to Russian literature, commonly referred to as the "superfluous man," after Ivan Turgenev's *The Diary of a Superfluous Man* (1850). Other writers who explored the concept include Mikhail Lermontov (*A Hero of Our Time*, 1840), Ivan Goncharov (*Oblomov*, 1859), Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, and Chekhov.