

Aleksandr Kuprin: Narrative Pace, Richness of Theme and Interest in Human Soul

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Abstract

Kuprin's position in the history of Russian literature is highly significant, if not unique. Born into an age overshadowed by the great Russian novel, which had reached its zenith in the 1860s, he turned to the short story as the genre suited both to his own restless temperament and to the manifold preoccupations of his generation... With his contemporaries Chekhov, Gorky, and Bunin, he brought the genre of the short story to an efflorescence without parallel in Russian letters. What he conceded in restraint to Chekhov, conviction to Gorky, and subtlety to Bunin, Kuprin made up for in narrative pace, construction of plot, and richness of theme. These latter qualities, coupled with his abiding interest in the human soul, make him still very readable today.

Keywords: Kuprin, “The Duel”, “The Pit”, Russian novel, narrative pace, plot, theme, human soul.

Aleksandr Ivanovich Kuprin, (born Sept. 7 [Aug. 26, old style], 1870, Narovchat, Russia — died Aug. 25, 1938, Leningrad), Russian novelist and short-story writer, one of the last exponents of the great tradition of Russian critical realism.

His mother, Liubov' Kuprina, a strong-willed and somewhat authoritarian woman, was undividedly honored with the title of “supreme creature” by her son. Even at the age of sixty, Kuprin still spoke of his mother with awe and piety. A descendant of a princely Tatar family, the Kulunchakovs, she was proud of her ancestry and instilled like-minded feelings in her son; not surprisingly, one of the persisting themes in his art was the fate of the Tatars. He also very much appreciated his mother's sense of expression. “How many times would I steal from her, weaving her words and expressions into my own stories,” he wrote [Berkov 2020]. His father, Ivan Kuprin, a clerk for the arbitrator in Narovchat, died of cholera in 1871, at the age of thirty-seven when Aleksandr was barely a year old, and the impoverished Kuprin family was forced to move to the Widows' Home in Moscow in 1874. In 1876, at the age of six, young Kuprin entered the Razumovsky Pension for orphans of the gentry. He then resumed his education in the Second Moscow Military High School (known as Cadet Corps), which he entered in 1881, and completed his studies seven years later at the Alexander Military Academy.

Reflecting on his cadet childhood, Kuprin saw the general environment of military schools as dreadful. Taught to perceive themselves as superior to civilians, the boys at military schools were however denied any chance for a creative outlet. At the age of ten, the boy was confronted with the raging injustice, encouraged at military schools [Plotkin 2002]. Notions of nobility and justice, introduced by his mother, conflicted with the triumph of mindless power over weakness, propelled by the military disciplinarians. The teachers were rigid and physical punishment was common; the most serious crimes were grounds for suspension in the isolation room. Still, the harsh conditions of the cadet corps developed in Kuprin a craving for writing poetry. When he started writing at the age of ten, he was lucky to secure the backing of an unusually sympathetic and intelligent teacher, Tsukhanov, who helped young Kuprin enhance his literary skills. During his years at school Kuprin wrote approximately thirty poems – of patriotic, satirical, and lyrical character [Dybnik 2018].

Educated in military schools, he served as an officer in the army, a career he soon abandoned for a livelier and diversified life as a journalist, hunter, fisherman, actor, and circus worker. Literary fame came with “Poyedinok” (1905; The Duel), a realistically sordid picture of the emptiness of life in a remote military garrison [Jackson 2016]. Its appearance during the Russian-Japanese War coincided with and confirmed a national wave of antimilitary sentiment. Kuprin wrote prolifically; his subjects might be best described by the title of one of his best known stories, “Reka zhizni” (1906; “The River of Life”). He is a fascinated and an indiscriminating observer of the stream of life and especially of any milieu that constitutes a world of its own — a cheap hotel, a factory, a house of prostitution, a tavern, a circus, or a race track. His best known novel, “Yama” (1909–15; Yama: The Pit), deals with the red-light district of a southern port city. It dwells with enthusiasm on the minutiae of the everyday life of the prostitutes, their housekeeping, economics, and social stratification. As Kuprin's spokesman in the novel puts it, “all the horror is just this — that there is no horror! Bourgeois work days — and that is all...”

In 1896, Kuprin was hired as head accountant in the railroad works in the city of Donetsk, witnessing the life of railroad workers and putting all of his observations into a set of essays, to later shape them into a larger and more serious work, "The Moloch," which marked the start of Kuprin's most prolific decade of writing at the turn of the century. Together with "Moloch" (1896), a documentary of the plight of workers, among his most outstanding works of the time were his ode to femininity "Olesja" (1898), "At the Circus" (1901), "Horse Thieves" (1903), "The Duel" (1905), which portrayed the cruelty of life in a Russian military garrison, and "The Garnet Bracelet" (1911). Kuprin found his characters among ordinary people around him, the realism of his stories very often mixed with his beloved chivalric romanticism, like in the action and adventure story "The River of Life" (1906). "The Pit" (1905-1915) narrates the daily routine of prostitutes in the city of Odessa. In 1909 Kuprin was awarded the Pushkin prize, alongside Ivan Bunin.

"The Duel" became the literary sensation of the year. In 1905 some 45.5 thousand copies were sold, a vast number for the early 1900s. The novel caused a controversy which went on till 1917. Critics of the left welcomed "The Duel" as "another nail in the coffin of autocracy," while their conservative counterparts condemned it as "a perfidious assault on the ruling order." [Gura 2018] One officer even challenged Kuprin to a duel through a Petersburg paper. On the other hand, in the summer of 1905 a group of twenty officers wrote to the author, expressing their gratitude for the novel. "The Duel", according to Luker, marked "the summit of Kuprin's career... assuring him immortality in the annals of Russian literature." [<https://adebiportal.kz/en/authors/view/2743>]

In 1908 Kuprin started working on "The Pit", his most ambitious and controversial work. The first part of this novelistic study of prostitution appeared in 1909, the second in 1914, and the third in 1915. Part I, as it came out, provoked widespread controversy, parts II and III were met with almost universal indifference. Kuprin, who could not decide, apparently, whether his novel should be a documentary or fiction, either oscillated between the two or attempted to combine them in an artificial way. "He is more successful when in documentary vein, and so Part I, with its details of life in the brothel, is by far the best," argues Luker. The novel was criticized by some Russian critics and authors (Lev Tolstoy among them) for excessive naturalism, but many admired it, among them young Nina Berberova.

"The Pit" was Kuprin's last major work, and to many it signaled the decline of his creativity. Much of Kuprin's work between 1912 and the outbreak of the World War I is regarded as inferior, with the exception of "Black Lightning" and "Anathema". Kuprin's visit to the South of France between April and July 1912 gave rise to "The Cote d'Azur", the twenty sketches forming a cycle of travel impressions. In 1911 he moved his family to Gatchina, near Saint Petersburg. Kuprin's style is extremely natural. He picks up the slang and argot that is peculiar to his subject and describes everything with zest and colour and with a goodness of heart that compensates for any shortcomings he may have in originality or intellectual depth. After the Revolution, Kuprin became one of the many Russian émigrés in Paris, where he continued to write, although exile was not fruitful for his essentially extroverted, repertorial talent.

Years in Paris had broken his health and transformed him into an old man. The tragic change was noticed by the writer Nikolay Teleshov, his friend of the early 1900s. Visiting Kuprin shortly after his arrival, Teleshov found him confused, rambling, and pathetic. "He left Russia ... physically very robust and strong," he wrote later, "but returned an emaciated. ... feeble, weak-willed invalid. This was no longer Kuprin – that man of outstanding talent – it was something... weak, sad, and visibly dying." [Volkov 2011] He eventually returned to Moscow on 31 May 1937, just a year before his death, at the height of the Great Purge. Kuprin's return earned publication of his works within the Soviet Union, but he wrote practically nothing new after that. In June 1937, to mark the first anniversary of Gorky's death in June, Izvestiya published Kuprin's "Fragments of Memoirs". In October the sketch "My Native Moscow" came out. The writer's general reaction to what was happening around him was far from euphoric. In her account of Kuprin's last months, daughter Lidia Nord painted a picture of a disillusioned old man who felt he was a stranger in his native country.

Like most Russian intelligentsia, Kuprin repulsed the Bolsheviks and very likely remained an anti-Communist throughout his life, though he did make attempts to cooperate with the new regime. He was part of the "World Literature" project supervised by Maxim Gorky and had discussions with Lenin about opening a newspaper for peasants, a project however that never came to light. In his short stories of the period, "Sashka and Yashka," "Brave Defectors," "Caterpillar," and "Solomon's Star" no direct reference is made to political events. In the fall of 1919 Kuprin became editor of a newspaper issued by the one of the counter-revolutionary armies and later fled with it to Estonia and then to Paris in the summer of 1920.

One of the many Russian émigrés writing in Paris, he lived a life of poverty for the next seventeen years, away from his readers, severely homesick and in bad shape, both physically and professionally. "My homesickness does not pass, it does not blunt, but attacks me ever more frequently and becomes ever deeper," he wrote [Izmailov 2009]. As an émigré, Kuprin devoted himself mainly to journalism. While working in the Paris media, he published many articles denouncing Bolshevik ideology, condemning the decay of Russian culture and the degradation of the Russian intelligentsia, who accepted the revolution, and expressed his general concern about the imminent socialist threat to Europe. As his feelings of impending death and torturous homesickness weighed on him, Kuprin made plans to return to Russia. He was tormented by bitter thoughts that he had abandoned his beloved country in times of troubles. Very sick and completely

unable to resume writing, Kuprin returned to Russia in 1937, full of ideas for new stories and scripts – hopes not destined to be realized. In 1937 he was allowed to return to the motherland.

Less than a year after returning home, at the age of sixty-eight, Aleksandr Kuprin died of an incurable form of cancer on 25 August 1938 in Leningrad. He was buried at the Literaturskiye Mostki in the Volkovskoye Memorial Cemetery.

Made famous by his novel “The Duel” (1905), Kuprin was highly praised by fellow writers including Anton Chekhov, Maxim Gorky, Leonid Andreyev, Nobel Prize-winning Ivan Bunin and Leo Tolstoy who acclaimed him a true successor to Chekhov [Williams 2007]. Although he lived in an age when writers were carried away by literary experiments, Kuprin did not seek innovation and wrote only about the things he himself had experienced and his heroes are the next generation after Chekhov's pessimists. Vladimir Nabokov styled him "the Russian Kipling" for his stories about pathetic adventure-seekers, who are often "neurotic and vulnerable." All through the 20th century Alexander Kuprin remained "one of the widest read classics in Russian literature," with many films based on his works, partly due to "his vivid stories of the lives of ordinary people and unhappy love, his descriptions of the military and brothels, making him a writer for all times and places."

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