

## The Tragic Destiny of a Russian Woman: Poetry of Anna Akhmatova

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### Abstract

*The article reveals the theme and motif of a Russian woman and her tragic destiny in the poetry of Anna Gorenko, known to her admirers as Akhmatova, who is one of the brightest and most talented poets of the Silver Age. She lived a long and full of tragic events life. This proud and at the same time fragile woman witnessed two revolutions and two world wars. Her heart was wounded by repressions and death of friends and relatives. The poetry of Anna Akhmatova can be called "the book of woman's soul". At the turn of the centuries – 19th and 20th, on the edge of the great revolution, in the epoch shattered by two world wars, there appeared, formed and developed perhaps the most significant female poetry in the history of the new time. Do we really need to distinguish between "male" and "female" poetry? Of course the great poetry is all-human, but it will hardly be possible to understand Akhmatova's work not taking into consideration its female character.*

**Keywords:** Akhmatova, Russian poetry, an image of a Russian woman, tragic destiny.

### 1.0. Introduction

*You have come to bury me.  
Then where is your pick, where your spade?  
You have only a flute in your hands.  
I will not blame you,  
For is it a shame that at some time, long ago,  
Forever my voice fell silent.  
Anna Akhmatova (1912)*

Anna Akhmatova is regarded as one of Russia's greatest poets. In addition to poetry, she wrote prose including memoirs, autobiographical pieces, and literary scholarship on Russian writers such as Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin. She also translated Italian, French, Armenian, and Korean poetry. In her lifetime Akhmatova experienced both prerevolutionary and Soviet Russia, yet her verse extended and preserved classical Russian culture during periods of avant-garde radicalism and formal experimentation, as well as the suffocating ideological strictures of socialist realism. Akhmatova shared the fate that befell many of her brilliant contemporaries, including Osip Emil'evich Mandel'shtam, Boris Leonidovich Pasternak, and Marina Ivanovna Tsvetaeva. Although she lived a long life, it was darkened disproportionately by calamitous moments. Isaiah Berlin, who visited Akhmatova in her Leningrad apartment in November 1945 while serving in Russia as first secretary of the British embassy, aptly described her as a "tragic queen," according to György Dalos. Berlin's assessment has echoed through generations of readers who understand Akhmatova — her person, poetry, and, more nebulously, her poetic persona — as the iconic representation of noble beauty and catastrophic predicament.

### 2.0. Interrelation between Biography and Poetry

She was born Anna Andreevna Gorenko on June 11, 1889 in Bol'shoi Fontan, near the Black Sea, the third of six children in an upper-class family. Her mother, Inna Erazmovna Stogova, belonged to a powerful clan of landowners, while her father, Andrei Antonovich Gorenko, had received his title from his own father, who had been created a hereditary noble for service in the royal navy. Gorenko grew up in Tsarskoe Selo (literally, Tsar's Village), a glamorous suburb of St. Petersburg — site of an opulent royal summer residence and of splendid mansions belonging to Russian aristocrats. Tsarskoe Selo was also where, in 1903, she met her future husband, the poet Nikolai Stepanovich Gumilev, while shopping for Christmas presents in Gostinyi Dvor, a large department store. This first encounter made a much stronger impression on Gumilev than on Gorenko, and he wooed her persistently for years. In Tsarskoe Selo, Gorenko attended the women's Mariińskaia gymnasium yet completed her final year at Fundukleevskaia gymnasium in Kiev, where she graduated in May 1907; she and her mother had moved to Kiev after Inna Erazmovna's separation from Andrei Antonovich. In 1907 Gorenko enrolled in the Department of Law at Kiev College for Women but soon abandoned her legal studies in favor of literary pursuits. Gorenko began writing verse as a teenager. Although she did not fancy Gumilev at first, they developed a collaborative relationship around poetry. He edited her first published poem, which appeared in 1907 in the second issue of Sirius, the journal that Gumilev founded in Paris.

She signed this poem, “Na ruke ego mnogo blestiaschchikh kolets” (translated as “On his hand are lots of shining rings,” 1990), with her real name, Anna Gorenko. Eventually, however, she took the pseudonym Akhmatova. The pen name came from family lore that one of her maternal ancestors was Khan Akhmat, the last Tatar chieftain to accept tribute from Russian rulers. According to the family mythology, Akhmat—who was assassinated in his tent in 1481—belonged to the royal bloodline of Genghis Khan.

### 3.0. A Russian Woman in Anna Akhmatova’s Poetry

Readers have been tempted to search for an autobiographical subtext in these poems. In fact, Akhmatova transformed personal experience in her work through a series of masks and mystifications. In a poem about Gumilev, titled “On liubil ...” (published in *Vecher*; translated as “He Loved ...” 1990), for example, she poses as an ordinary housewife, her universe limited to home and children. The heroine laments her husband’s desire to leave the simple pleasures of the hearth for faraway, exotic lands:

On liubil tri veshchi na svete: Za vechernei pen’e, belykh pavlinov I stertye karty Ameriki. Ne liubil, kogda plachut deti, ..... ... A ia byla ego zhenoi.	He loved three things in life: Evensong, white peacocks And old maps of America. He hated it when children cried, ..... ... And I was his wife.
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Akhmatova and Gumilev did not have a conventional marriage. They lived separately most of the time; one of Gumilev’s strongest passions was travel, and he participated in many expeditions to Africa. Moreover, Akhmatova’s attitude toward her husband was not based on passionate love, and she had several affairs during their brief marriage (they divorced in 1918). When “On liubil ...” was written, she had not yet given birth to her child. Her only son, Lev Nikolaevich Gumilev, was born on September 18, 1912. Akhmatova entrusted her newborn son to the care of her mother-in-law, Anna Ivanovna Gumileva, who lived in the town of Bezhetsk, and the poet returned to her bohemian life in St. Petersburg. Akhmatova’s second book, *Chetki* (Rosary, 1914), was by far her most popular. By the time the volume was published, she had become a favorite of the St. Petersburg literary beau monde and was reputed for her striking beauty and charismatic personality. During these prewar years, between 1911 and 1915, the epicenter of St. Petersburg bohemian life was the cabaret “Brodiachaia sobaka” (The Stray Dog), housed in the abandoned cellar of a wine shop in the Dashkov mansion on one of the central squares of the city. The artistic elite routinely gathered in the smoky cabaret to enjoy music, poetry readings, or the occasional improvised performance of a star ballet dancer. The walls of the cellar were painted in a bright pattern of flowers and birds by the theatrical designer Sergei Iur’evich Sudeikin. Akhmatova read her poems often at the Stray Dog, her signature shawl draped around her shoulders. The Stray Dog was a place where amorous intrigues began — where the customers were intoxicated with art and beauty. Akhmatova first encountered several lovers there, including the man who became her second husband, Vladimir Kazimirovich Shileiko, another champion of her poetry. She also had an affair with the composer Artur Sergeevich Lur’e (Lourie), apparently the subject of her poem “Vse my brazhniki zdes’, bludnitsy” (from *Chetki*; translated as “We are all carousers and loose women here,” 1990), which first appeared in *Apollon* in 1913: “You are smoking a black pipe, / The puff of smoke has a funny shape. / I’ve put on my tight skirt / To make myself look still more svelte.” This poem, precisely depicting the cabaret atmosphere, also underlines the motifs of sin and guilt, which eventually demand repentance. The two themes, sin and penitence, recur in Akhmatova’s early verse. Passionate, earthly love and religious piety shaped the oxymoronic nature of her creative output, prompting the critic Boris Mikhailovich Eikhenbaum, the author of *Anna Akhmatova: Opyt analiza* (Anna Akhmatova: An Attempt at Analysis, 1923), to call her “half nun, half whore.” Later, Eikhenbaum’s words gave Communist Party officials in charge of the arts reason to ban Akhmatova’s poetry; they criticized it as immoral and ideologically harmful. In *Chetki* the heroine is often seen praying to, or evoking, God in search of protection from the haunting image of her beloved, who has rejected her. This kind of female persona appears, for example, in “Ia nauchilas’ prosto, mudro zhit” (translated as “I’ve learned to live simply, wisely,” 1990), first published in *Russkaia mysl’* in 1913: “I’ve learned to live simply, wisely, / To look at the sky and pray to God ... / And if you were to knock at my door, / It seems to me I wouldn’t even hear.” A similar heroine speaks in “Budesh’ zhit’, ne znaia likha” (translated as “You will live without misfortune,” 1990):

Budesh’ zhit’, ne znaia likha, Pravit’ i sudit’, So svoei podrugoi tikhoi Synovei rastit’. ..... I dlia nas, sklonennykh dolu, Altari goriat, Nashi k Bozh’emu prestolu Golosa letiat.	You will live without misfortune, You will govern, you will judge. With your quiet partner You will raise your sons. ..... And for us, descending into the vale, The altars burn, And our voices soar To God’s very throne.
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Once more she finds the most economical way to sketch her emotional landscape. The simplicity of her vocabulary is complemented by the intonation of everyday speech, conveyed through frequent pauses that are signified by a dash, for instance, as in “Provodila druga do perednei” (translated as “I led my lover out to the hall,” 1990), which appeared initially in her fourth volume of verse, *Podorozhnik* (Plantain, 1921): “A throwaway! invented word — / Am I really a note or a flower?” Akhmatova’s poetry is also known for its pattern of ellipsis, another example of a break or pause in speech, as exemplified in “Ia ne ljubvi tvoei proshu” (translated as “I’m not asking for your love,” 1990), written in 1914 and first published in the journal *Zvezda* (The Star) in 1946: “I’m not asking for your love — / It’s in a safe place now ...” The meaning of unrequited love in Akhmatova’s lyrics is twofold, because the speaker alternately suffers and makes others suffer. But whether falling victim to her beloved’s indifference or becoming the cause of someone else’s misfortune, the persona conveys a vision of the world that is regularly besieged with dire events—the ideal of happiness remains elusive.

The outbreak of World War I marked the beginning of a new era in Russian history. Many perceived the year 1913 as the last peaceful time—the end of the sophisticated, light-hearted fin de siècle period. Artists could no longer afford to ignore the cruel new reality that was setting in rapidly. For the bohemian elite of St. Petersburg, one of the first manifestations of the new order was the closing of the Stray Dog cabaret, which did not meet wartime censorship standards. Akhmatova’s poetic voice was also changing; more and more frequently she abandoned private lamentations for civic or prophetic themes. In the poem “Molitva” (translated as “Prayer,” 1990), from the collection *Voina v russkoi poezii* (War in Russian Poetry, 1915), the lyric heroine pleads with God to restore peace to her country: “This I pray at your liturgy / After so many tormented days, / So that the stormcloud over darkened Russia / Might become a cloud of glorious rays.” Akhmatova believed herself clairvoyant. Many of her contemporaries acknowledged her gift of prophecy, and she occasionally referred to herself as Cassandra in her verse. Akhmatova’s firm stance against emigration was rooted in her deep belief that a poet can sustain his art only in his native country. Above all defining her identity as a poet, she considered Russian speech her only true “homeland” and determined to live where it was spoken. Later, Soviet literary historians, in an effort to remold Akhmatova’s work along acceptable lines of socialist realism, introduced excessive, crude patriotism into their interpretation of her verses about emigration.

#### **4.0. Personal Reflection in the Poetry**

In the 1920s Akhmatova’s more epic themes reflected an immediate reality from the perspective of someone who had gained nothing from the revolution. She lamented the culture of the past, the departure of her friends, and the personal loss of love and happiness — all of which were at odds with the upbeat Bolshevik ideology. Critics began referring to Akhmatova as a “relic of the past” and an “anachronism.” She was criticized on aesthetic grounds by fellow poets who had taken advantage of the radical social changes by experimenting with new styles and subject matters; they spurned Akhmatova’s more traditional approach. Eventually, as the iron grip of the state tightened, Akhmatova was denounced as an ideological adversary and an “internal émigré.” Finally, in 1925 all of her publications were officially suppressed. The state allowed the publication of Akhmatova’s next book after Anno Domini, titled *Iz shesti knig* (From Six Books), only in 1940. The 15 years when Akhmatova’s books were banned were perhaps the most trying period of her life. Except for her brief employment as a librarian in the Institute of Agronomy in the early 1920s, she had never made a living in any way other than as a writer. Since all literary production in the Soviet Union was now regulated and funded by the state, she was cut off from her most immediate source of income. Despite the virtual disappearance of her name from Soviet publications, however, Akhmatova remained overwhelmingly popular as a poet, and her magnetic personality kept attracting new friends and admirers. The help she received from her “entourage” likely enabled her to survive the tribulations of these years. Occasionally, through the selfless efforts of her many friends, she was commissioned to translate poetry. Besides verse translation, she also engaged in literary scholarship. Her essays on Pushkin and his work were posthumously collected in *O Pushkine* (On Pushkin, 1977). During the long period of imposed silence, Akhmatova did not write much original verse, but the little that she did compose — in secrecy, under constant threat of search and arrest — is a monument to the victims of Joseph Stalin’s terror. Between 1935 and 1940 she composed her long narrative poem *Rekviem* (1963; translated as *Requiem* in *Selected Poems* [1976]), published for the first time in Russia during the years of perestroika in the journal *Oktiabr’* (October) in 1989. It was whispered line by line to her closest friends, who quickly committed to memory what they had heard. Akhmatova would then burn in an ashtray the scraps of paper on which she had written *Rekviem*. If found by the secret police, this narrative poem could have unleashed another wave of arrests for subversive activities. As Akhmatova states in a short prose preface to the work, *Rekviem* was conceived while she was standing in line before the central prison in Leningrad, popularly known as *Kresty*, waiting to hear word of her son’s fate. A talented historian, Lev spent much of the time between 1935 and 1956 in forced-labor camps — his only crime was being the son of “counterrevolutionary” Gumilev. Before he was eventually dispatched to the camps, Lev was first kept in *Kresty* along with hundreds of other victims of the regime. The era of purges is characterized in *Rekviem* as a time when, “like a useless appendage, Leningrad / Swung from its prisons.” Akhmatova dedicated the poem to the memory of all who shared her fate — who had seen loved ones dragged away in the middle of the night to be crushed by acts of torture and repression: “They led you away at dawn, / I followed you like a mourner ...” Without a unifying or consistent meter, and broken into stanzas of various lengths and rhyme patterns, *Rekviem* expresses a disintegration of self and world. Mixing various genres and styles, Akhmatova creates a striking mosaic of folk-song elements, popular mourning rituals, the Gospels, the odic tradition, and lyric poetry.

She revives the epic convention of invocations, usually addressed to a muse or a divinity, by summoning Death instead — elsewhere called “blissful.” Death is the only escape from the horror of life: “You will come in any case—so why not now? / I am waiting for you — I can’t stand much more. / I’ve put out the light and opened the door / For you, so simple and miraculous.” In the epilogue, visualizing a monument that may be erected to her in the future, Akhmatova evokes a theme that harks back to Horace’s ode “Exegi monumentum aere perennius” (I Erected a Monument More Solid than Bronze, 23 BCE). This theme has proven consistently popular in European literature over the past two millennia, and Pushkin’s “Ia pamiatnik sebe vozdvig nerukotvornyi” (My monument I’ve raised, not wrought by human hands, 1836) was its best known adaptation in Russian verse. Horace and those who followed him used the image of the monument as an allegory for their poetic legacy; they believed that verse ensured posthumous fame better than any tangible statue. Akhmatova, however, speaks literally of a bronze monument to herself that should be set before the prison gates:

A esli kogda-nibud’ v etoi strane  
Vozdvignut’ zadumaiut pamiatnik mne,

And if ever in this country  
They decide to erect a monument to me,

Soglas’e na eto daiu torzhestvo,  
No tol’ko s uslov’em—ne stavit’ ego

I consent to that honor  
Under these conditions—that it stand

Ni okolo moria, gde ia rodilas’;  
Posledniaia s morem razorzvana sviaz’.

Neither by the sea, where I was born:  
My last tie with the sea is broken,

Ni v tsarskom sadu u zavetnogo pnia,  
Gde ten’ bezuteshnaia ishchet menia,

Nor in the tsar’s garden near the cherished pine stump,  
Where an inconsolable shade looks for me,

A zdes’, gde stoiala ia trista chasov  
I gde dlia menia ne otkryli zasov.

But here, where I stood for three hundred hours,  
And where they never unbolted the doors for me.

Akhmatova finds another, much more personal metaphor for the significance of her poetic legacy: her poem becomes a “mantle of words,” spread over the people she wishes to commemorate.

In Tashkent, Akhmatova often recited verse at literary gatherings, in hospitals, and at the Frunze Military Academy. After her recovery from a severe case of typhus in 1942, she began writing her fragmentary autobiography. Captivated by her surroundings in Uzbekistan, she dedicated several short poetic cycles to her “Asian house,” including “Luna v zenite: Tashkent 1942-1944” (translated as “The Moon at Zenith,” 1990), published in book form in *Beg vremeni*. Akhmatova’s special attitude toward Tashkent was stimulated by her belief in her own Asian pedigree, as she writes in the “Luna v zenite” cycle: “I haven’t been here for seven hundred years, / But nothing has changed . . .” Just as her life seemed to be improving, however, she fell victim to another fierce government attack. Most likely, it was triggered by two visits from Isaiah Berlin, who, merely because of his post at the British embassy, was naturally suspected of being a spy by Soviet officials. Through a mutual acquaintance, Berlin arranged two private visits to Akhmatova in the fall of 1945 and saw her again in January 1946. Akhmatova always cherished the memories of her nightlong conversations with Berlin, a brilliant scholar in his own right. Inspired by their meetings, she composed the love cycle “Cinque” (first published in the journal *Leningrad* in 1946; translated, 1990), which was included in *Beg vremeni*; it reads in part: “Sounds die away in the ether, / And darkness overtakes the dusk. / In a world become mute for all time, / There are only two voices: yours and mine.” She paid a high price for these moments of happiness and freedom. Akhmatova experienced dramatic repercussions. She was expelled from the Union of Soviet Writers; the loss of this membership meant severe hardship, as food supplies were scarce at the time and only Union members were entitled to food-ration cards. Almost all copies of her recently published books were destroyed, and further publications of original poetry were banned. Most significant, Lev, who had just defended his dissertation, was rearrested in 1949. The situation seemed so hopeless that friends advised Akhmatova to buy her son’s pardon by compromising her gift of poetry.

While she identifies with her generation, Akhmatova at the same time acts like the chorus of ancient tragedies (“And the role of the fatal chorus / I agree to take on”) whose function is to frame the events she recounts with commentary, adoration, condemnation, and lamentation. Furthermore, negative aesthetics play an important role in *Poema bez geroia*. They are expressed in particular not just through the absence of a concrete hero but also through ellipses, which Akhmatova inserts to suggest themes that could not be discussed openly because of censorship. Another focal point of the poem is the nonevent, such as the missed meeting with a guest who is expected to call on the author: “He will come to me in the Fountain Palace / To drink New Year’s wine / And he will be late this foggy night.” The absent character, to whom the poet refers further as a “guest from the future,” cannot join the shadows of Akhmatova’s friends, because he is still alive. Anna Akhmatova strongly disliked the word “poetess,” especially when applied to her. For she was a poet. The depth of individuality and expression of her poems is simply astounding. A sense of frivolity, including numerous trysts, combined with incredible strength of mind and firmness of character enabled her to survive the terrible years of repression, the loss of her husband, the arrest of her son, and the printing ban on her poems. The portraits of Anna Akhmatova are myriad.

Her striking appearance, slender neck, languid eyes, slightly humped trademark nose, and austere fringe were the perfect muse. Nathan Altman, Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin, Zinaida Serebryakova, Yuri Annenkov, and many other artists all created haunting portraits of her, tinged with tragedy. She herself in her poems created the image of a fragile, mournful woman, like in one of the most famous works:

Under a dark veil she wrung her hands...  
 'What makes you grieve like this?'  
 I have made my lover drunk  
 With a bitter sadness. (1911)

Akhmatova also penned one of the most powerful anti-Stalin poems to have survived, albeit less well-known than Mandelstam's "We live without feeling the country beneath us."

I shall come into your dream  
 As a black ewe, approach the throne  
 On withered and infirm  
 Legs, bleating: 'Padishah,  
 Have you dined well? You who hold  
 The world like a bead, beloved  
 of Allah, was my little son  
 To your taste, was he fat enough?' (1931)

A year before her death, at the age of 75, when her poems had not been published in her homeland for 18 long years, Akhmatova was invited to England and presented a PhD gown from Oxford University. In a ceremonial speech, it was said that, "this majestic woman is rightfully called by some 'the second Sappho.'" English newspapers, which actively covered the visit of this great poet who had been "rejected in the Stalin era," wrote how she was deeply moved by such international recognition.

### 5.0. Conclusion

The poetry of Anna Akhmatova can be called "the book of woman's soul". At the turn of the centuries – 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>, on the edge of the great revolution, in the epoch shattered by two world wars, there appeared, formed and developed perhaps the most significant female poetry in the history of the new time. Do we really need to distinguish between "male" and "female" poetry? Of course the great poetry is all-human, but it will hardly be possible to understand Akhmatova's work not taking into consideration its female character. And the main explanation of it is in the world and Russian history itself – it was for the very first time that a woman had a poetic voice of such strength! Already in the 19<sup>th</sup> century there were a lot of women writing poems, and good ones, too, but still in general it was kind of "poetic periphery" and their names are now half-forgotten. Spiritual energy of woman's soul that had been kept for centuries poured out during the revolutionary epoch in Russia in the poetry of a woman with a modest name – Anna Gorenko. Under the pseudonym of Akhmatova Anna gained world-wide recognition throughout her 50-year poetic career and was translated to all the main languages of the world. Female emancipation expressed itself in poetic equality as well. "I taught women to speak", - noticed Akhmatova in one of her epigrams.

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