University of Nebraska - Lincoln
DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Russian Language and Literature Papers | Modern Languages and Literatures, Department of

10-1-2011

Inherently Russian and Inherently Roman: Tolstoy's Miniature Masterpiece "Alyosha the Pot"

Radha Balasubramanian
University of Nebraska - Lincoln, rbalasub@unlnotes.unl.edu

Thomas Nelson Winter
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, twinter1@unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/modlangrussian

Part of the Modern Languages Commons

Balasubramanian, Radha and Winter, Thomas Nelson, "Inherently Russian and Inherently Roman: Tolstoy's Miniature Masterpiece "Alyosha the Pot"" (2011). *Russian Language and Literature Papers.* Paper 8.
http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/modlangrussian/8

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Modern Languages and Literatures, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Russian Language and Literature Papers by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Inherently Russian and Inherently Roman: Tolstoy's Miniature Masterpiece "Alyosha the Pot"

By

Radha Balasubramanian and Thomas Winter

University of Nebraska Lincoln

Leo Tolstoy's short story, "Alyosha the Pot" is considered a masterpiece in miniature, which "completely fulfills Tolstoy's prescription of 'universal art."[1] In order to explain this universal appeal, we looked closely at its structure and found that there was a paradox in the way it was laid out: i.e., while the story was inherently Russian, it read as inherently Roman! This fusion of two great literary traditions becomes apparent in our article by examining the story within some of its Russian literary convention and showing the existence and use of Roman patterns in the chain of events. For the most part, the Russian elements deal with character portrayal, while the Roman, with the plot construction. The result of the two is an enhanced understanding and appreciation of the miniature literary gem that is "Alyosha the Pot."

Tolstoy understands that in a very short story there was no room for error; everything must work; every paragraph must be right. Part of the efficiency and the tight compactness of this story lies in its:

1. incorporation and tacit use of Roman traditions that apparently persisted into Tolstoy's time, and
2. both its use of, and distinction from, the Russian literary tradition of the *маленький человек* ("small man").[2]

This inquiry helps the reader in recognizing these assimilations and at the same time knowing the distinctions of the art of the work. In the following discussion we will take up different structural aspects of the story and explain the continuation of the Russian traditions or the Roman ones as applicable.

We will consider "Alyosha the Pot" on several levels, starting with narrative of describing Alyosha's life, then considering it as a series of interconnected links. The narrative, at the simplest level can be expressed in a sentence: win the reader's sympathy for a character, build hopes for him with a love interest, and then kill him. Tolstoy does this with an amazing, tightly-wound, efficiency from the very first word.

Presented at: European Studies Conference, 36th Annual. 6-8 October 2011, University of Nebraska at Omaha, Omaha, Nebraska

The story begins in a very familiar traditional way of introducing the hero: *Алёшка*[3] in a colloquial style with the hero's name as "Alyoshka," derived from "Aleksei." The attending priest presumably christened him "Aleksei." But "Aleksei" is a name used for a grown-up in a neutral or a formal address. "Alyosha" is the diminutive used often in an informal setting. But that is not enough for our hero as he is even closer to our hearts. He is introduced by the narrator with the diminutive of the diminutive "Alyoshka." Who do we talk to in diminutives right away upon introduction? Only to young kids; in English, that would be comparable to baby-talk: "sweet little Alyoshkin!" With this double-diminutive, our hero is placed as if very dear to us already at the beginning with the first word. Once that is established, Tolstoy reverts to the single diminutive for the remainder of the tale, simply "Alyosha," probably to describe him not so much as a child, but as a teen-ager. Then the very next three words, *был меньшой брат* ("was the younger brother"),[4] also do double duty. The colloquialism in the sub-standard, *меньшой* (littler), instead of *младший* (younger), shows the *сказ* (oral-story-telling)[5] type of narration creating an aura of a tale about an unsophisticated, simpleton who strictly adheres to his own time-tested rules and regulations. And a tale about the "younger brother" perhaps even puts us in the world of fairy-tale, where the younger brother will overcome all difficulties, overcome the older brother, and win the maiden. The troubles, as expected in fairy tales, begin immediately. In the next sentence Alyosha drops and breaks a pot of milk that his mother gives him to take to the Deacon's wife. This incident got him the nickname "Alyosha the Pot."

This introduction is suggestive of a "small man," the *маленький человек*,[6] so well known to the readers of Pushkin, Gogol and Dostoevsky. The nickname, "Alyosha the Pot," and the hero's taciturn acceptance of it, are reminiscent of Gogol's hero of the story "The Overcoat." Gogol's hero Akaky Akakievich and the array of the insignificant, "small men," are very traditionally 19th century Russian heroes. This movement of replacing a romantic hero with a nondescript, pathetic male was started by Pushkin in his prose works. More well-known among them are his Evgeny in the "Bronze Horseman"[7] and the station master (Samson Vyrin) in the story "The Station Master."[8] Later this type of a character becomes the hero for most of Gogol's and Dostoevsky's short stories in which the life of an unnoticeable, inconsequential person in Petersburg is described in intimate terms. Gogol's hero Akaky is born and is doomed to get his father's name, as no other name faintly acceptable came up, and he becomes Akaky Akakievich (literally, Akaky, the son of Akaky). The child made a grimace and accepted the name and his

fate then and ever since, just like Tolstoy's hero "Alyosha the Pot" would do in this story. Alyosha, like all the other "small men," accepts life the way it plays out and carries out his duty when asked for without questioning. He is endowed with a meek, obedient nature, unpolluted by external influences and he continues to be so as the story progresses.

Alyosha gains our sympathy in being untouched by academe, either in letters or catechism. Our hero is inured to farm work from childhood, and is unaffected by the temptations and the evil influence of the city. He lives in rural purity and innocence, in contrast with the older brother. Even if one tries to educate Alyosha, he would not have got it and he did not have the time for it, as he was busy helping his father:

> *В деревне была школа, но грамота не далась Алёше, да и некогда было учиться. Старший брат жил у купца в городе, и Алёшка сызмальства стал помогать отцу.*[9]
>
> (There was a village school, but letters weren't for Alyosha, and he had no time to learn. The older brother lived with a merchant in town, and Alyosha began helping his father from childhood on).

With further characterization of the title character, Tolstoy offers the reader a naive, untaught, unritualized purity of the soul:

> *Молитв он никаких не знал; как его мать учила, он забыл, а все-таки молился и утром и вечером - молился руками, крестясь.*[10]
>
> (He didn't even know how to pray; as his mother was teaching, he forgot; but prayed anyway morning and evening, with his hands, crossing himself).

This reminds one of the station master, in Pushkin's story of the same name, who had pictures of the story of 'Prodigal son' adorning his walls, telling us his implicit, unquestioning acceptance of Christian teachings, and of Gogol's Akaky who uncharacteristically was about to make small error while copying and exclaimed: "Oh dear!" in a loud voice and crossed himself.[11] Like these heroes of the past, Alyosha too makes his faith a simple part of his daily routine. For Alyosha and the "small men," expression of faith through actions and pictures, was just an accepted part of their existence or more like a mere habit.

Alyosha is described as, *малый худощавый, лопоухий* (a fellow who was skinny and lop-eared).[12] Gogol's "small man" Akaky was said to be unremarkable because of the way he appeared, "somewhat short, somewhat pockmarked, somewhat red-haired man, who looked

rather short-sighted and was slightly bald on the top of his head …"[13] The physical non-descript appearance did not bother either of them, because both heroes were paying all of their attention to work they performed. They followed orders implicitly and did their best when given a task.

The Roman tradition, in contrast, offers no comparable character that rejoices in his work. The old Roman ways are not in description of the type of a character, but mostly in plot structure by giving certain expected roles to family members in their hierarchy. Among these are: 1) the ancient definition of the ideal farm worker, 2) the absolute control of the father's *potestas*, (*Patria potestas* is the father's complete authority over his children, financial, marital, even mortal), 3) the father's right to hire out his son, the father's right to the earnings of a son, 4) the son as soldier having control (instead of the father) over the military salary, and 5) the father's control over marriage of his sons. Each of these serves as a pivotal point in the direction of the story; each, when elucidated, helps the reader appreciate the story more.

First, we mention that putting a character in a rustic setting, to gain him a more sympathetic reception, goes all the way back to Greco-Roman Comedy. Alyosha's childhood as a farm boy:

> *Ему было шесть лет, уж он с девчонкой-сестрой овец и корову стерег на выгоне, а ещё подрос, стал лошадей стеречь и в денном и в ночном. С двенадцати лет уж он пахал и возил.*[14]
>
> (When he turned six, he was already tending the sheep and the cow with his sister, and as he grew, he began to take care of the horses by day and night. From the age of twelve, he was plowing and driving wagons).

Being inured from childhood to farm-work is an ancient preference, and an ancient means of gaining the sympathy of the audience/reader. For example, the young swain in Menander's *Dyscolus* wins the heart of the maiden's brother and father who have control over whom the maiden will wed and they reject the city boy, but the swain is then is advised to join the farm work with these words: "perhaps he'd tolerate some word even from you because he thought you were a working farmer, by your way of life, a poor man."[15] Further Columella confirms about working on the farm that a slave "is to be preferred who is hardened and tested by work from infancy."[16] Just like Tolstoy's Alyosha's lop-eared, and almost canine appearance is preferred to work tirelessly in the farm, Columella further admonishes that the *villicus* not be: *ne villicum ex*

eo genere servorum, qui corpore placuerunt[17] (the sort that please with their physical appearance)."[17] Finally Columella concludes that, "a slave from town is useless on the farm."[18]

The sweet rustic life is not to continue for Alyosha, and it is a double-barreled holdover from the laws and traditions of old Rome that removed our farm-boy Alyosha, and sent him to the city. This set up a turning-point in the short story as up until then, the pay earned by the older brother working for a merchant in the city (a) went to the father, but (b) was lost to the father when the big brother enlisted in the army, and thus, so far as the father was concerned, needed replacing. This is also according to the Roman law, as we see from the *Institutes* of Gaius:

> *Igitur quod liberi nostri, quos in potestate habemus, item quod serui nostri mancipio accipiunt uel ex traditione nanciscuntur siue quid stipulentur uel ex aliqualibet causa adquirunt, id nobis adquiritur: ipse enim, qui in potestate nostra est, nihil suum habere potest*.[19]
>
> (Therefore everything that our children, whom we have in our *potestas*, also whatever our slaves acquire by sale, delivery, or stipulation, or in any other manner whatsoever, *is acquired for us* [emphasis added], since he, who is in our *potestate* can have nothing of his own).

The older brother's earnings from the merchant went to the father. When do a son's earnings *not* go to the father? Again, in short, the military pay, the *castrense peculium*,[20] is the soldier's own, and he may even bequeath it.

The significance for Tolstoy's story is this: the older son enlisting in the army meant a loss of income for the father. Army pay, unlike any other earnings of a son, does not go to the *paterfamilias*, the head of the household. This motivated the father to remove Alyosha from the farm and hire him out to the merchant in the town, where the main story takes place, and where we again consider him in the setting of Russian characters as Alyosha gets re-evaluated. His appearance comes to the forefront and raises issues about his personality.

Here "Alyosha the Pot," who was nineteen, was taken to the merchant to work in his "new outfit": *Алёше дали сапоги братнины старые, шапку отцовскую и поддевку и повезли в город*.[21] (He was given his brother's old boots, his father's old coat and cap, and was taken to town). Although Alyosha was delighted with his clothes and boots, he did not impress the employers with his looks. It was only through his work that he soon earned their approval.

Служил он ещё лучше брата. Точно был безответный, на все дела его посылали и всё делал охотно и скоро без останова переходя от одного дела к другому.[22]

(He [Alyosha] worked even better than his brother had done; he was really very willing. They sent him on all sorts of errands, but he did everything quickly and readily, going from one task to another without stopping).

Similarly, Gogol's Akaky's shabby appearance and his old tattered overcoat was the target of jokes in the department where he worked. But Akaky's attention was not deterred by the annoyance of his colleagues, as he diligently worked: "It would be hard to find a man who lived so much for his job. It was not sufficient to say that he worked zealously. No, his work was a labor of love to him."[23] Both the heroes took on more work and even seem to relish it. Alyosha suddenly found romance when the maid Ustina started noticing him and paid attention to him for what he was: *Алёша в первый раз почувствовал, что он, сам он, не его услуги, а он сам нужен другому человеку*.[24] (He felt for the first time in his life that he--not his services, but he himself--was needed to another human being). Similarly, most of the "small men" in the Russian literary tradition found a new interest in life (Evgeny in the "Bronze Horseman" found love in a young woman, Parasha), or a passion to acquire something (like the overcoat that Akaky decided to get), which made them feel suddenly somewhat special and worth-while.

Unfortunately, the dream to be loved, or to own the object they loved, was short-lived for all of these "small men." And each of them simply died or gave up the will to live. Alyosha's wish to marry Ustina was truncated by the mistress of the house who complained to his father that such a union was unacceptable. When Alyosha was told to give up such "nonsensical" ideas, he was sad, but he obeyed.

Alyosha had no other choice but to comply with his father's wishes. Here again, the survival of Roman law/tradition turns the story and brings it to the denouement. There is no "happily-ever-after" of fairy tales for Alyosha. The merchant for whom he was working was like a Roman master, and a good Roman master controlled any and all arrangements between male and female slaves in his employment. For instance, the entire plot of Plautus's comedy *Casina*, hinged on which male the master will assign to the slave girl. Of course, Alyosha and the sympathetic cook were not slaves. However this only means that the merchant still needs Alyosha's father to confirm that the marriage is forbidden. The Roman father's *potestas* meant

complete authority over a son, including *when* he will marry, and *whom* he may marry. The father's fiat seemed utterly Roman:

> *Жениться захотел. Я женю, когда время подойдет, и женю на ком* надо.[25]
>
> (You wished to marry. When the time comes, I'll deal with it, and marry you to whom you must).
>
> The father, motivated by Alyosha's salary that comes to him, duly forbade the marriage, but has an excuse for his fiat: he uses the ancient preference for country over town, reprising of the tradition of preferring farm virtues as if Ustina being a town girl was a disqualification: *а не на шлюхе городской*[26] (And not to some town slut).

Thus Alyosha accepted his fate again, but this time, he had to lull his emotions and give up his nascent dream to love and be loved. He, visibly dejected, continued to serve his master, when:

> *Потом приказчик послал его счищать снег с крыши. Он полез на крышу, счистил весь, стал отдирать примерзлый снег у желобов, ноги покатились, и он упал с лопатой....потянулся и помер.*[27]
>
> (Later the clerk sent him to clear the snow off the roof. Alyosha climbed on to the roof and swept away all the snow; and, while he was still raking out some frozen lumps from the gutters, his foot slipped and he fell over…. stretched himself and died).

This inconspicuous, sudden death echoed the fate of many of the "small men" in Russian literature. Gogol's Akaky Akakievich was robbed of his new overcoat at night when he was returning after the party. Devastated, he had nowhere to turn and when all his attempts to complain to law and order turned futile, he just became seriously ill and died. Evgeny of the "Bronze Horseman" also lost his beloved to the floods of 1824 in St. Petersburg. The grief made Evgeny lose his composure and stand up to Peter the Great and accuse the Tsar for his fate—i.e., it appeared to him that it was the city that Peter found in the swamps that caused his misery! Soon in his head he was being chased by the enraged Peter. Finally he ran and ran until he was found dead floating in water next to an old hut.

Clearly, in the Russian tradition, we find the "small men," such as Akaky, Evgeny, Alyosha, die without attaining the happiness that they realize existed and were about to grasp.

Still, they lived their lives, although almost invisibly but usefully, by performing their duty diligently. Alyosha used his hands and feet to do what he knew to do and that is what defined his existence. Finally, in the ancient classical tradition, we speak of our hero with the help of Homer:

> *οὐ μὲν γὰρ μεῖζον κλέος ἀνέρος ὄφρα κεν ᾖσιν,*
> *ἤ ὅ τι ποσσίν τε ῥέξῃ καὶ χερσὶν ἑῇσιν.*[28]
> (For there is no greater glory for a man so long as he lives
> than what he gains through his feet and his hands).

Taking this Homeric definition for the theme of this section, we see that Alyosha is Homerically anti-heroic. He won his name, if not his glory, with his feet and hands at the start as he tripped and let the pot of milk fall. "The Pot" he broke as he slipped and let go from his hands, is the renown, the name that he wins. At the end, he swept snow off the roof, slipped, fell and broke "the Pot," which is Alyosha the Pot, himself! But in between the linked beginning-end, he does win his glory, with his feet and his hands. Alyosha is saintly in his description and he knows only how to pray with his hand. He also uses his hands to help the people and do the chores while his feet take him to where he needs to be to fulfill his obligations. Throughout the book Alyosha is described running from one place to another, always carrying out orders. The book opens with the explanation of how Alyosha got his nickname:

> *Прозвали его Горшком за то, что мать послала его снести горшок молока дьяконице, а он споткнулся и разбил горшок. Мать побила его, а ребята стали дразнить его «горшком». Алешка Горшок – так и пошло его прозвище.*[29]
> (He was called the Pot, because his mother had once sent him with a pot of milk to the deacon's wife, and he had stumbled against something and broken it. His mother had beaten him, and the children had teased him. Since then he was nicknamed the Pot).

Here Alyosha is introduced in a way that is going to be typical for him—carrying a pot of milk as his mother had asked him to, but falling down having stumbled upon something and thus breaking the pot. It was this broken pot that symbolizes him for his entire life.

He spent his life serving others doing various chores. A typical winter day is described thus:

> *Потом топил печи, чистил сапоги, одежду хозяевам, ставил самовары, чистил их, потом либо приказчик звал его вытаскивать товар, либо кухарка приказывала*

ему месить тесто, чистить кострюли. Потом посылали его в город, то с запиской, то с хозяйской дочерью в гимназию, то за деревянным маслом для старушки.[30]

(He would light the stoves, clean the boots, prepare the samovars and polish them afterwards; or the clerk would get him to bring up the goods; or the cook would set him to knead the bread and clean the saucepans. Then he was sent to town with a note, or to bring the daughter home from school, or to get some lamp oil for the old lady).

Alyosha was busy constantly working with his hands that served him well. Besides helping everyone with his hands, he also used those very same hands to pray: but he prays just the same, every morning and every evening, with his hands on his heart crossing himself. The hands and the heart ("serving others" and "feeling emotions" respectively) are intact in him until he dies. It is his feet that from the beginning that fail him.

We see that his feet take him to places. It was his feet that once in a while gave up on him. He stumbled and fell with the pot when he was a young boy, he wore out his boots and needed working boots twice (once when he joined the farmer's household and later when his wages were garnished for newer boots) until he finally slipped and fell.

Such was one winter day when he went up the roof to sweep some snow from the roof, when he slipped and fell. He fell not on the soft snow but on a piece of iron. As his hands were toiling, his feet gave away and he fell down on an iron rod like the pot he once had dropped, "broke" and soon simply died.

The pot broken at the start spilled out milk, white and pure and washed the earth. The pot broken at the end spilled out … Alyosha? In Lucretius, the physical body is the vessel containing the life force, the life atoms, or the soul.

nunc igitur quoniam quassatis undique vasis
diffluere umorem et laticem discedere cernis,
et nebula ac fumus quoniam discedit in auras,
crede animam quoque diffundi multoque perire
ocius et citius dissolvi in corpora prima,[31]

(Now then, as you see water and liquids spread out everywhere when vessels are broken, and since cloud and smoke waft into the breezes, trust that the spirit too, is poured out and perishes and dissolves more quickly into its first elements).

Seen this way, "Alyosha the Pot" is "everyman," but not just "everyman," because he is the altruist saint everyone might aspire to be, who selflessly gives and gives until he has no more to give, breaks and empties like the pot spreading his goodness.

End Notes

[1] Ernest E. Simmons *Tolstoy*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London and Boston 1973, p. 201

[2] T. E. Filippova, ed. *Obraz "malen'kogo cheloveka" v literature*. M: "Nauka" 1995.

[3] L. N. Tolstoj, *Sobranie sochinenij* M: Khudozhestvennaya literatura, 1964 p. 213.

[4] Ibid.

[5] www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/547338/skaz

[6] T. E. Filippova, p. 344.

[7] A.S. Pushkin, *The Bronze Horseman* tr. Waclaw Lednicki, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1955

[8] F. M. Dostoevsky, *The Poor Folk* www.online-literature.com

[9] L. N. Tolstoy, p. 213.

[10] L. N. Tolstoy, p. 215.

[11] N. V. Gogol, *The Overcoat and other tales of good and evil*, tr, David Magarshack, New York, London: W. W. Norton and Company, 1957 p. 249.

[12] L. N. Tolstoy, p. 213.

[13] N. V. Gogol, pp. 232-234.

[14] L. N. Tolstoy, p. 213.

[15] Menander, *Dyscolus*, Vincent Rosivach, tr. Retrieved September 12, 2011 from http://faculty.fairfield.edu/rosivach/cl103a/dyskolos.htm lines 366-369.

[16] Columella, *De Re Rustica* [On Country Management], ca. 50 AD. Text retrieved September 1, 2011 from Thelatinlibrary.com: The passage is at book 1, line 8: Eligendus est rusticis operibus ab infante duratus et inspectus experimentis.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Gaius, *Institutes,* [Roman legal code, ca 20 A.D. Text retrieved from thelatinlibrary.com September 20, 2011, book 2, line 87.

[20] Gaius, *Institutes* book 2, line106

[21] L. N. Tolstoy, p. 213.

[22] L. N. Tolstoy, p. 214.

[23] N. V. Gogol, p. 237.

[24] L. N. Tolstoy, p.216.

[25] L. N. Tolstoy, p. 217.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Homer, *The Odyssey* book 8, lines 147-148.

[29] L. N. Tolstoy, p.213.

[30] L. N. Tolstoy, p. 215.

[31] Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, text retrieved from the Latinlibrary.com November 17, 2011.

Bibliography

Sources Cited:

Columella, *De Re Rustica* [On Country Management], ca. 50 AD. Text retrieved September 1, 2011 from Thelatinlibrary.com

Dostoevsky, F. M. *The Poor Folk* www.online-literature.com

Filippova, T. E. ed. Obraz *"malen'kogo cheloveka" v literature*. M: "nauka" 1995.

Gaius, *Institutes*, [Roman legal code, ca 20 A.D. Text retrieved from thelatinlibrary.com

Gogol, N. V. *The Overcoat and other tales of good and evil,* tr. David Magarshack, New York, London: W. W. Norton and Company, 1957.

Homer, *The Odyssey* book 8.

Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, text retrieved from the Latinlibrary.com November 17, 2011.

Menander, *Dyscolus*, Vincent Rosivach, tr. Retrieved September 12, 2011 from http://faculty.fairfield.edu/rosivach/cl103a/dyskolos.htm.

Pushkin, A.S. *The Bronze Horseman* tr. Waclaw Lednicki, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1955.

Simmons Ernest E. *Tolstoy*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London and Boston 1973.

Tolstoj, L. N. *Sobranie sochenenij* M: khudozhestvennaya literature, 1964.