

# RUSSIA AND BLACK AMERICA

Lecture Two

Alexander Pushkin: A Life in Literature,

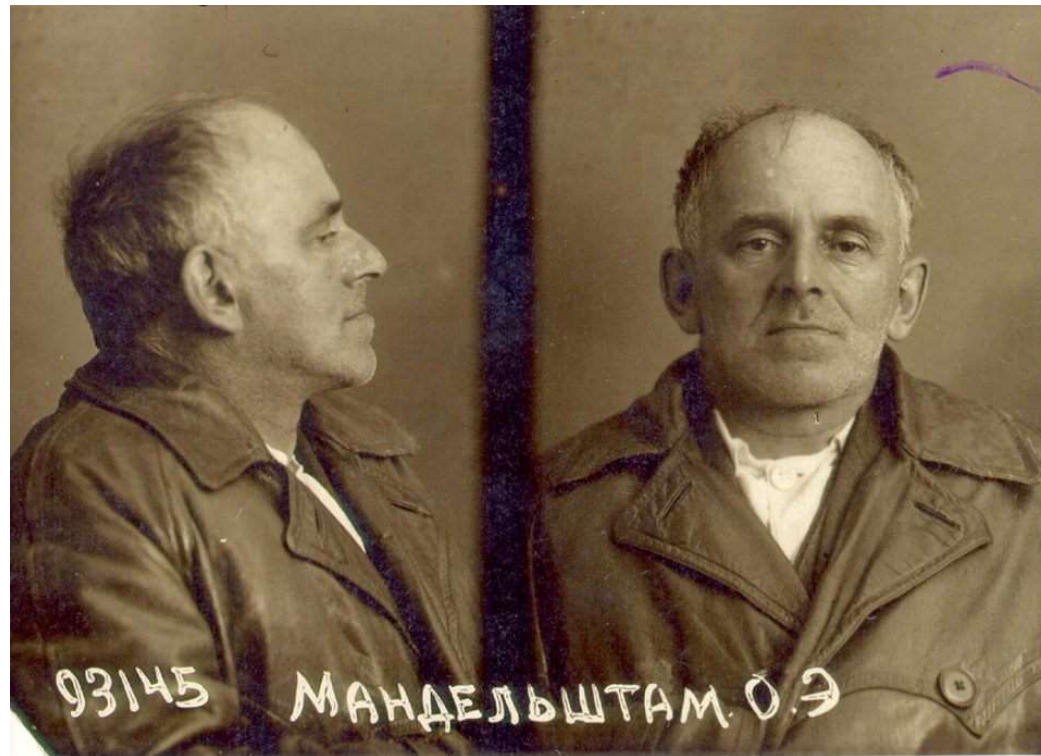
Or,

A Story in Words and Statues

Tuesday, March 5, 2024

“In Russia poetry matters so much, they kill you for it.”

Photo of Osip Mandelshtam (1891-1938) taken when he was in Soviet secret police custody during the Great Terror. Within a few months, he would perish in a prison camp



Alexander Pushkin, "Exegi Monumentum" (1836), tr. by A.Z. Foreman

We heard him say, "I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and within three days I will build another made without hands."

Mark 14:58

*I've reared a monument not built by human hands.  
The public path to it cannot be overgrown.  
With insubmissive head far loftier it stands  
Than Alexander's columned stone.*

*No, I shall not all die. My soul in hallowed berth  
Of art shall brave decay and from my dust take wing,  
And I shall be renowned while on this mortal earth  
A single poet lives to sing.*

*Tidings of me shall spread through all the realm of Rus  
And every tribe in Her shall name me as they speak:  
The haughty western Pole, the east's untamed Tungus,  
North Finns and the south steppe's Kalmyk.*

*And long shall I a man dear to the people be  
For how my lyre once quickened kindly sentiment,  
I in a tyrant age who sang of liberty,  
And mercy toward fallen men.*

*To God and his commands pay Thou good heed, O Muse.  
To praise and slander both be nonchalant and cool.  
Demand no laureate's wreath, think nothing of abuse,  
And never argue with a fool.*

The dismantling of a Pushkin statue in Kiev (2023)



This monument to Pushkin in a park in the Latvian capital of Riga, erected as recently as 2009, was removed in 2023



Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837) is Russia's Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe, and Byron rolled into one!



Two advertisements for (very) high-end Breguet watches...



*Perpetuelle, à répétition.*

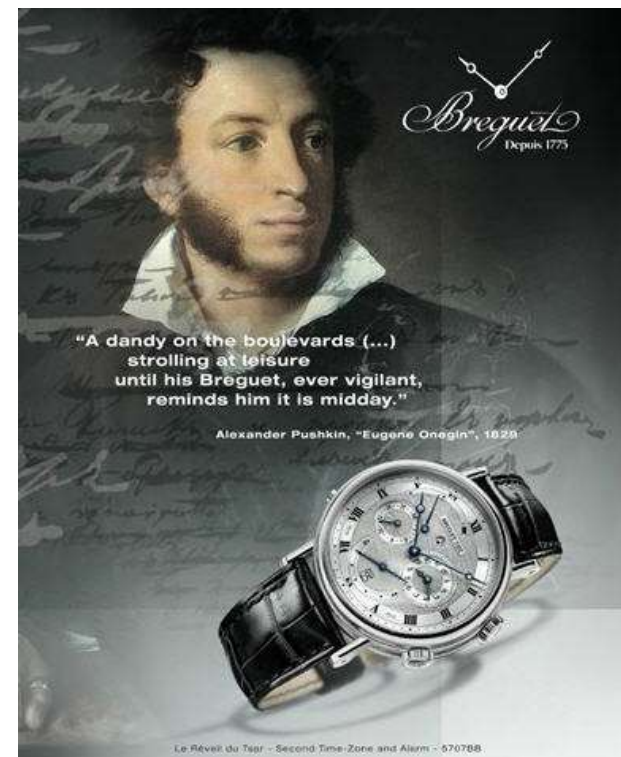
*Vendue à Bonaparte*

Napoleon Bonaparte,  
from 1798, a client of Breguet.

**Breguet**  
Depuis 1775

Classique Collection - Perpetual Calendar - 6378A  
www.breguet.com  
Breguet SA, CH-1700 Yverdon  
Breguet Group (UK) Ltd, 4th Floor, Peninsula 1, Pine St, 84, South Street Centre, New York

The advertisement features a portrait of Napoleon Bonaparte in military uniform, holding a sword. The background is filled with faint, handwritten cursive text. A gold-toned watch with a white dial and Roman numerals is shown in the lower right corner.



*Depuis 1775*

**Breguet**  
Depuis 1775

"A dandy on the boulevards (...) strolling at leisure until his Breguet, ever vigilant, reminds him it is midday."

Alexander Pushkin, "Eugene Onegin", 1829

**Breguet**  
Depuis 1775

Le Réveil du Tzar - Second Time-Zone and Alarm - 670788

The advertisement features a portrait of Alexander Pushkin with a beard, wearing a dark coat. The background is filled with faint, handwritten cursive text. A silver-toned watch with a white dial and Roman numerals is shown in the lower right corner.

...as worn, among others, by Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church





## Pushkin's major works

“Ruslan and Lyudmila” (1820)

“The Prisoner of the Caucasus” (1822)

“The Fountain of Bakhchisaray” (1824)

“Gypsies” (wr. 1824, publ. 1827)

*The Moor of Peter the Great* (1828)

*Boris Godunov* (wr. 1825, publ. 1831)

*The Tales of the Late Ivan Petrovich Belkin* (1831)

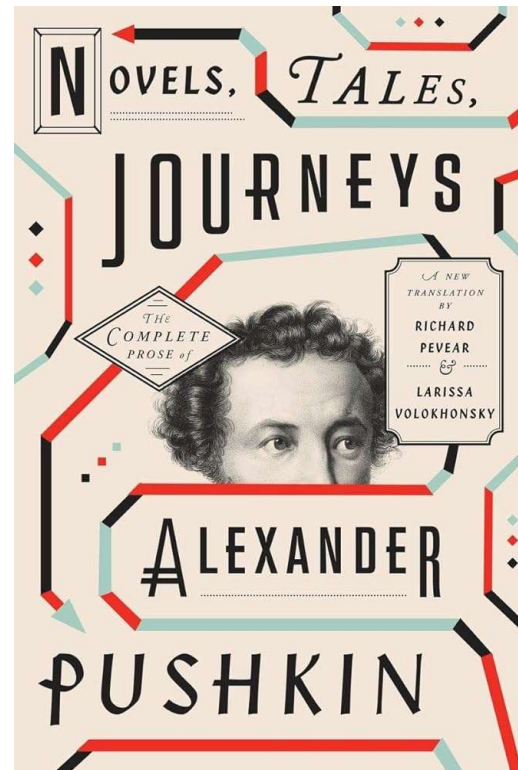
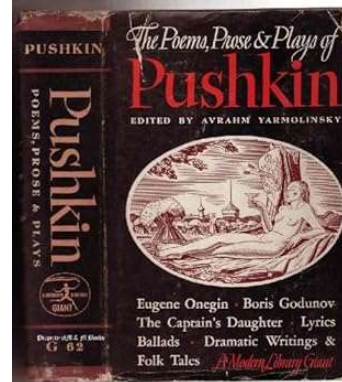
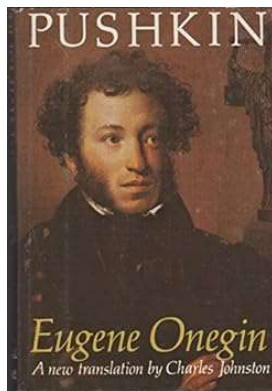
*Eugene Onegin* (1825-1833)

“The Queen of Spades” (1834)

“The Bronze Horseman” (wr. 1833, publ. 1837)

*The Captain's Daughter* (1836)

My STRONG recommendation: Pushkin's *Novels, Tales, Journeys* translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Knops, 2016). In terms of our course, *The Moor of Peter the Great* (1828) is of particular interest



L: Pushkin's great-grandfather Abram Gannibal (1696-1781), a godson of Peter the Great. He became a military engineer, a general, and a Russian nobleman. R: A modern illustration to *The Moor of Peter the Great*, Pushkin's unfinished autobiographical novel



# The opening of the Pushkin monument in Moscow on June 18, 1880



To become a true Russian, to become a Russian fully /.../  
means only to become the brother of all men, to become,  
if you will, a universal man. /.../ Our destiny is universality,  
won not by the sword, but by the strength of brotherhood  
and our fraternal aspiration to reunite mankind.

Fedor Dostoevsky

L to R: Pushkin statues and busts in Hammer, Germany (1994), Paris (1999), Santiago, Chile (1999), Rome (2000), Montreal (2002), Podgoritsa, Montenegro (2002), and Beijing (2007)



A billboard advertising the Big Mac next to the Pushkin statue. Photograph taken some time prior to February 24, 2022



This bust of Abram Gannibal in Petrovskoe, a hereditary estate of the Pushkin family in Pskov province, may be the only monument to a Black man in the whole of Russia



# The continent of Africa, Pushkin's ancestral homeland





## Pushkin monument in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia



Pushkin monument in Asmara, Eritrea



Ethiopia vs. Eritrea:  
A fraught history

Eritrean president Isaias Atwerki (on left) and Ethiopian prime minister Abiy Ahmed (on right) during the period of reconciliation between their two regimes in 2018-23



In his monograph *Abram Ganibal: L'aieul noir de Pouchkine* (Abram Ganibal: Puskin's Black Ancestor; 1996), Beninese scholar Dieudonné Gnamankou (on left) showed that Gannibal was probably born at Logone-Birni in present-day Cameroon. British journalist Hugh Barnes's biography *The Stolen Prince* (2005) brought the story of Pushkin's African forefather to an English-speaking audience

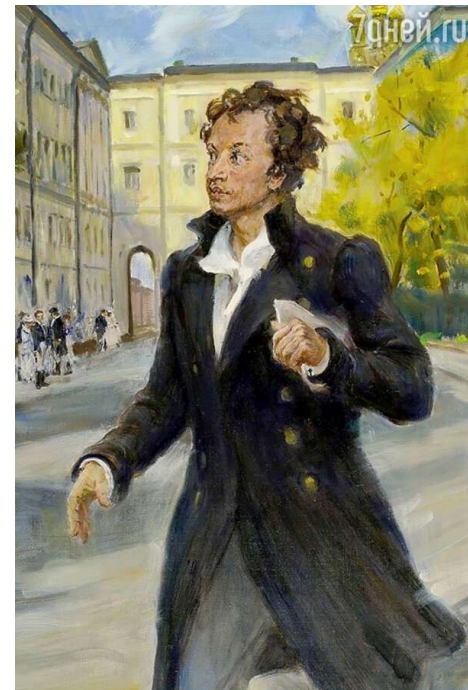


Logone-Birni, Cameroon is a town on the left bank of the Logone river on that country's border with Chad (left image). Medri Bahri is a locale in present-day Eritrea

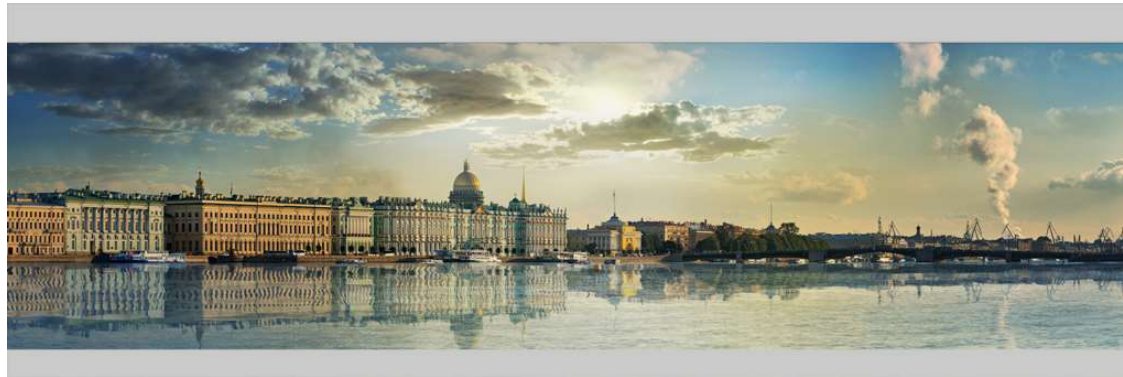


Arrivo della Commissione di inchiesta all'Asiara 3 maggio 1931

The poet was educated at the Imperial Lycée in Tsarskoe Selo



St. Petersburg, the imperial capital founded by Peter the Great. Pushkin lived here for most of his adult life



Moscow, Russia's ancient and modern capital, where Pushkin was born and which he frequently visited





Romantic representations of Pushkin during his southern exile in 1820-23, when he travelled to the Caucasus (on left) and the Crimea



The young Pushkin was a Romantic, like his idol George Byron, but what is Romanticism?

Aesthetics = ethics, or that which is beautiful (or exotic, or picturesque, or larger-than-life) is good

A fascination with the Other

Passion over reason

Nature over city

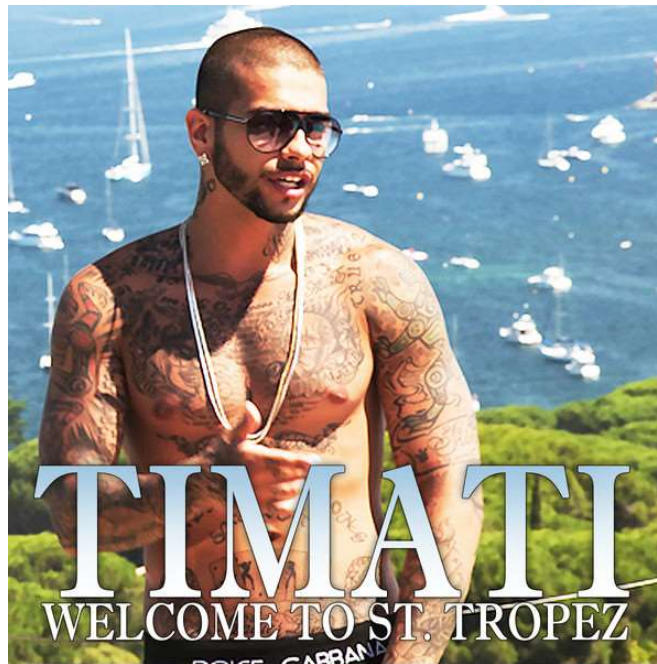
The joy of rebellion

Individualism over collectivism

The artist is at the center of his created universe and even of the universe as such. In the final analysis, art is about the artist

You can only, truly, be in love with yourself

Timati's persona and behaviors in "Welcome to St. Tropez" also presents the rapper in a Romantic light, or Romantic bling



Pushkin during his second exile, on the family estate of Mikhailovskoe, Pskov province (1823-26). He now abandoned Romanticism for a more direct representation of human, historical, and social subjects



In 1826 Nicholas I, Russia's new emperor, met with Pushkin in the Kremlin



Pushkin with his wife Natalya Goncharova (1812-1863), whom he married in 1832.  
They had four children



Pushkin's apartment at Moika, 12 in St. Petersburg is a museum and a Russian national space



Nikolai Ulyanov's painting *Pushkin and His Wife in Front of a Mirror at a Court Ball* (1936), a melodramatic representation of the poet and his wife in the period leading up to the fatal duel





Baron Georges D'Anthès (1812-1895) as a young officer in the Russian imperial guard and a middle-aged senator under the Second Empire



Pushkin's sister-in-law, Ekaterina Goncharova (1809-1843), who married D'Anthès shortly before the duel between the two men



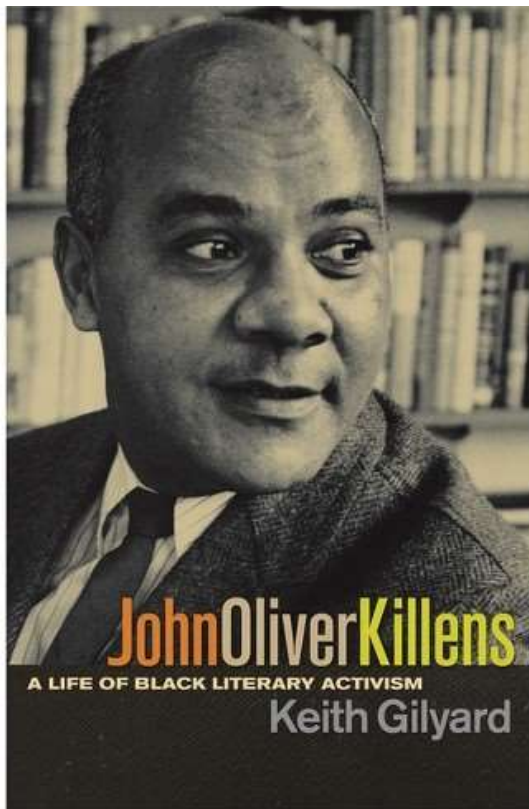
Pushkin's fatal duel took place on February 8, 1837 (painting by Adrian Volkov, *Alexander Pushkin's Last Shot*, 1869). The poet died two days later and was buried at Mikhailovskoe...



...where his grave is a place of cultural pilgrimage and a national space



John Oliver Killens (1916-1987) is the subject of a well-researched biography by Keith Gilyard (2011). The novelist continues to be popular with readers in the United States and overseas

The image is a promotional poster for an event celebrating the centennial of John Oliver Killens. It features the same black and white portrait of Killens as the book cover. The text on the poster is as follows:

**JOHN OLIVER  
KILLENS**  
**@100**  
**THURSDAY**  
**MARCH 17, 2016**  
**6:30PM-8:30PM**

**MEDGAR EVERS COLLEGE FOUNDERS AUDITORIUM**  
**1650 BEDFORD AVENUE BROOKLYN, NY 11225**

The year 2016 marks the centennial of the birth of novelist, educator, and activist John Oliver Killens. To honor this icon and literary champion, The Center for Black Literature, The Harlem Writers Guild, and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture will celebrate Killens's legacy.

**JOHN OLIVER KILLENS AT 100** is a pre-conference event for the **13TH NATIONAL BLACK WRITERS CONFERENCE**. The program will include a reflection on Killens's life, a discussion on the significance of his works, dramatic presentations with special guests Malaika Adera, Arthur Flowers, Woodie King Jr., Bernice McFadden, Diane Richards, Mariahadessa Ezere Tallie, and Ted Wilson among others who align themselves with Killens's politics and purpose.

For more information and to RSVP please visit [www.CenterforBlackLiterature.org](http://www.CenterforBlackLiterature.org)

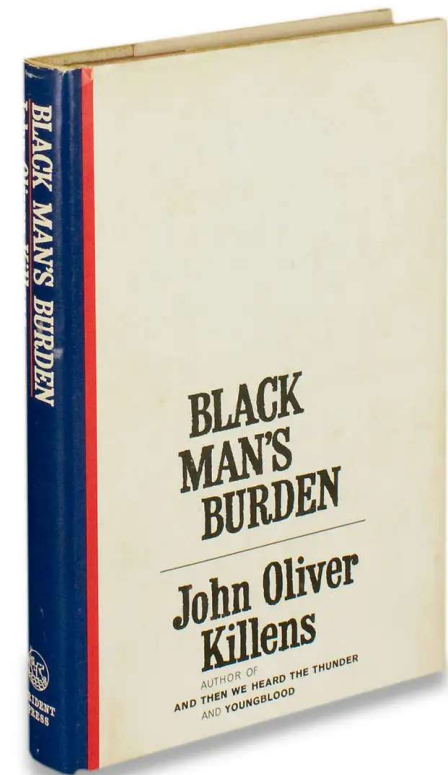
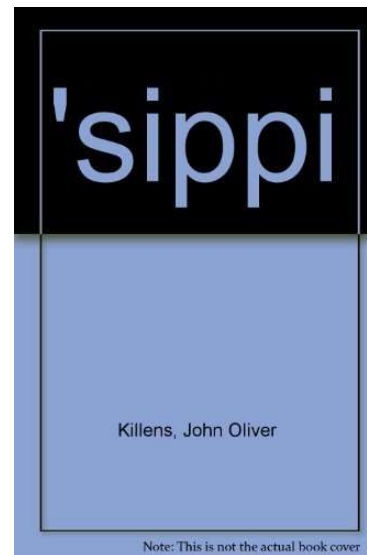
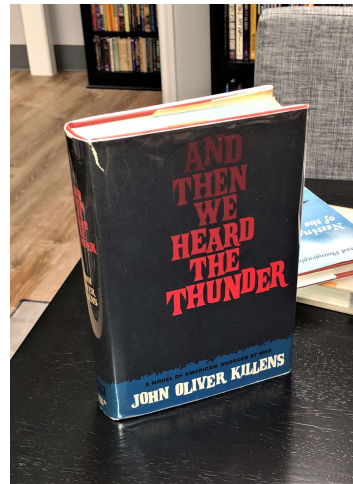
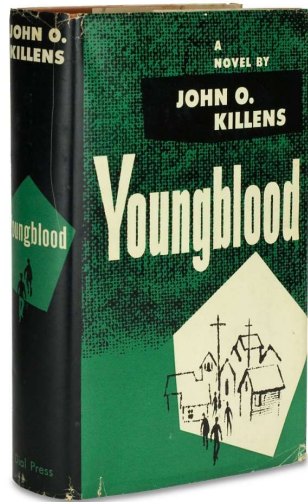
At the bottom of the poster, there are logos for the following organizations: The Center for Black Literature, Harlem Writers Guild, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, and The City University of New York.

Killens served in the US army during the Pacific Campaign, rising to the rank of Master Sergeant. After the war he co-founded the Harlem Writers Guild. Over the years its members have included young adults' novelist Walter Dean Myers, mystery writer and former editor of *Essence* magazine Valery Wilson Wesley, comedian Godfrey Cambridge, and actor Sidney Poitier:

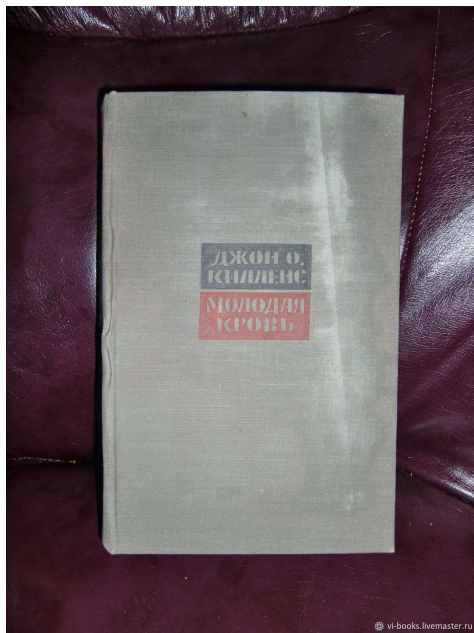
<https://theharlemwritersguild.org/index.html>



Killens's novels cover a variety of subjects and life experiences, many of them autobiographical in nature. *Youngblood* (1954) is the story of a Black family which confronts racism in the South, *And Then We Heard the Thunder* (1963) depicts racial tensions in the US military during World War II, while *Sippi* (1967) explores the civil rights struggle of the 1960s. Killens's next novel, *The Cotillion, Or, One Good Bull Is Half the Herd* (1971), was about upper-class African American society, while *Great Gittin' Up Morning: A Biography of Denmark Vesey* (1972) and *A Man Ain't Nothin' But a Man: The Adventures of John Henry* (1975) are biographical novels about, respectively, the leader of an 1822 slave and a legendary steel driver and folk hero. *Black Man's Burden* (1965), a collection of essays, was shaped by the writer's involvement with the Black Power movement.

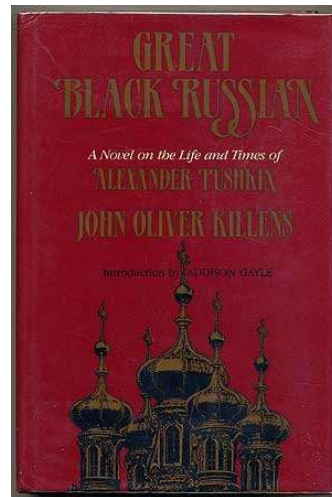


Killens's first two novels were translated into Russian during the post-Stalinist Thaw period





And then there was *Great Black Russian* (1989)



The fictive world = the imagined world in a given narrative or even video game. A fictive world will have its own population (human or non-human), flora, fauna, geography, climate, and history. Also, it will possess a logic or set of rules that govern the who, where, why, when, and how of every event, action, and situation that occurs inside that world

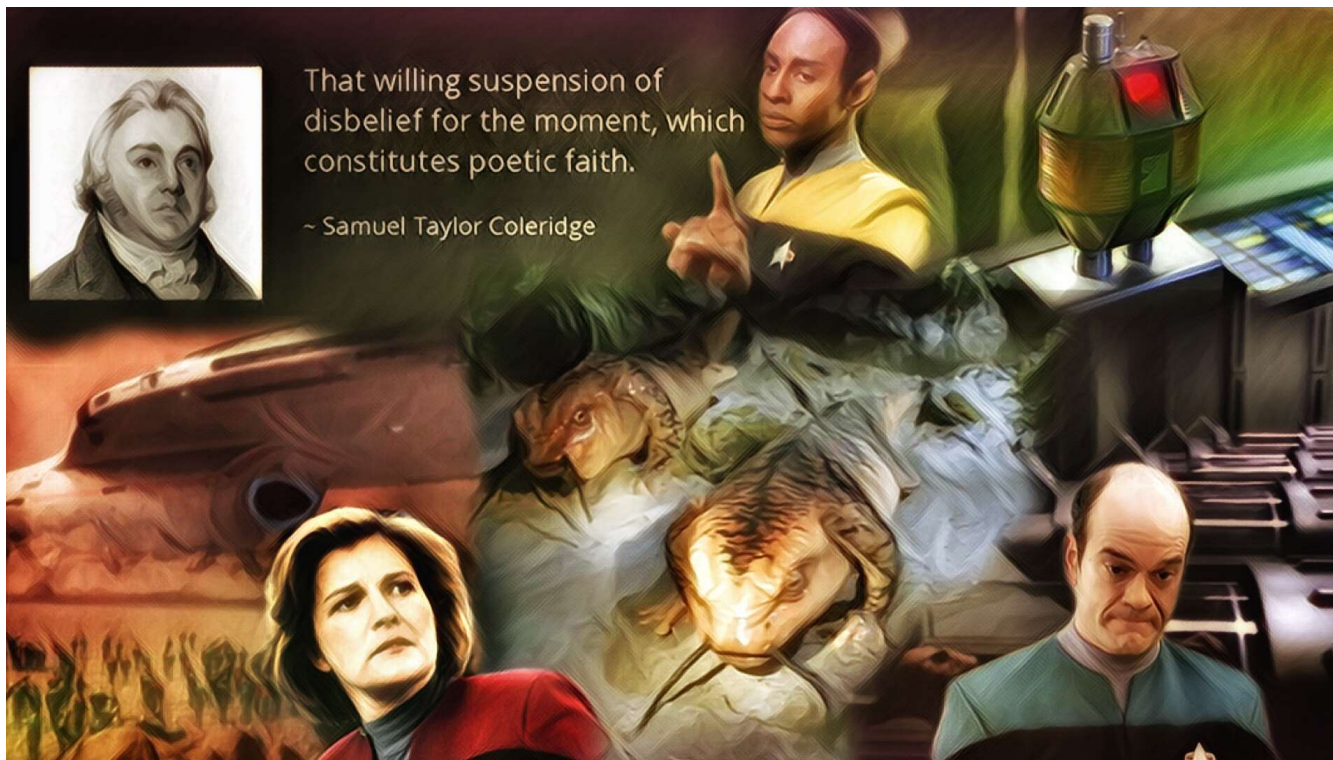


So what is the **fictive world** in *Great Black Russian* like? Think about its defining traits, components, and especially logic. One interesting element is the prevalence and variety of smells present in this imagined world



Watching, listening to, or reading a story requires the **suspension of disbelief** in order for the experience to be truly and magically effective. We are talking about programmed hallucination!

(image shows *Suspending Disbelief* collage by John Adams / PhoenixPhotography)



The IMAX movie format, like the traditional print novel, is designed to induce the receptor's (viewer's) suspension of disbelief, aided by visual and highly technical means as well as an appropriate environment. As long as there's no one in the seat behind you talking or munching or belching, and disrupting your SOD!



In *Great Black Russian*, the narration shifts between the perspective of the omniscient third-person narrator and **free indirect discourse** or **speech**, which is Pushkin-centered and -styled

“Perhaps Pushkin was so sick of Saint Petersburg, he wished to be banished from the scene, but nobody in their right mind wanted the salt mines of Siberia, or the bastille across the Neva River” (*Great Black Russian*, p. 114).

Here Pushkin is not speaking in the first person, but the third-person narration is shaped by his personality and angle of vision

**Set piece:** a passage representing a social ritual (e. g., a wedding, funeral, meal, hunt, or dance) that is clearly **coded**, i.e., enacted according to a given cultural list of rules. The set piece may proceed as per these rules, or be comedically, tragically, or scandalously disrupted. Think about all those Hollywood movies that feature a wedding. In *Great Black Russian*, the society dinner cum orgy at Countess Oshnikovna's palace is a case in point (pp. 111-114). Below: a masked ball can often serve as a set piece, in movies as well as novels, plays, and poems



Defamiliarization = “making it strange”

The technique of depicting familiar objects or situations in a manner that makes them seem unusual or exotic. There are two ways you can **defamiliarize**: via a simile or by paraphrase. A key element in many SF novels and movies, as well as mainstream fiction where it was introduced by, among others, Leo Tolstoy. The passage below is an example of **defamiliarization** from *Great Black Russian*: it describes Pushkin’s initial impression of Emperor Nicholas I as the latter is standing in front of a marble fireplace in his study.

“At first Pushkin has a sudden illusion that the Emperor was in fact a marble statue, an extension of the mantel, until he moved in his high black gleaming boots and a smile spread over his handsome face” (*Great Black Russian*, p. 265)

Btw, marble is usually *white* in color, so Emperor Nicholas is presented as the personification of whiteness in both a physical and a symbolic sense



Many of the major characters in *Great Black Russian* have a **leitmotif** or recurring signature trait, e.g., Pushkin's sense of being estranged from his surroundings or Emperor Nicholas's towering physique



In the novel, Pushkin's speech and thought patterns are highly metaphorical (poetry relies on metaphors; Modernism is also metaphorical). Thanks to the novel's use of the **free indirect speech** narrative technique, they may be said to constitute an **idiolect** (as opposed to **sociolect**)

“He could hear the pure-white kisses of the snow upon the window pains” (*Great Black Russian*, p. 335)

Realism vs. Modernism,  
or whole meanings vs. fragmentation



Robert Falk's *Negro. Circus Artist* (1917) is a Modernist painting



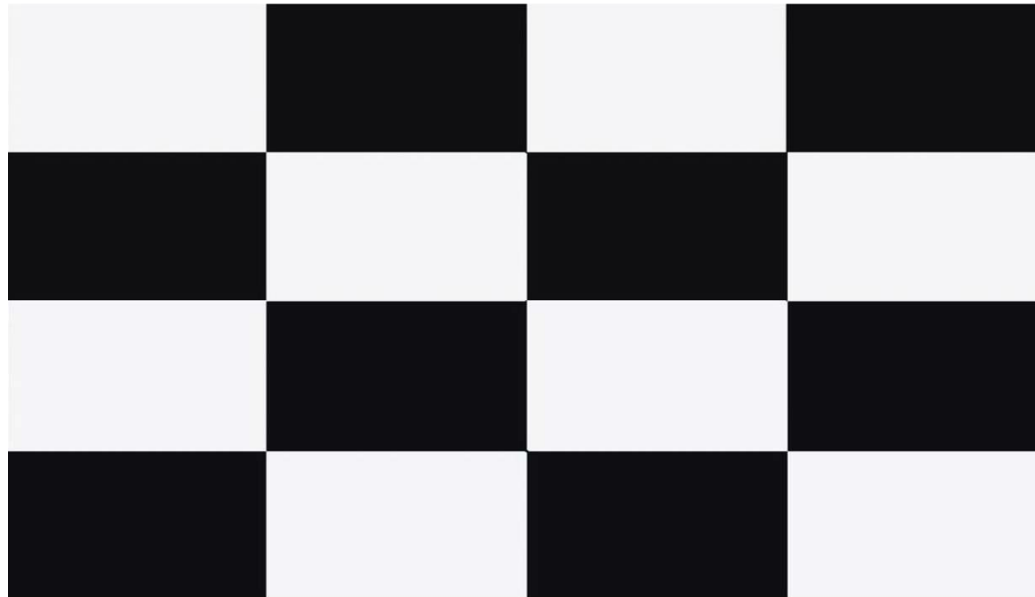
This description of an aging Sergei Pushkin as observed by the novel's protagonist (main character) is an example of **metonymy**. It reminds the reader of how advancing years cause physical changes to the human body, which is a universal law. Also present in this passage are the **tropes** (devices) of **emotional eavesdropping** and **defamiliarization**

“[...] The wrinkles in his father's face, the exaggerated jowls, and the even greater rims and bulges in his neck told him that Sergei Pushkin had crossed that Separating Line from which there was no turning back. The jowls would slacken even more. The wrinkles would increase, not lessen, as the days went swiftly by. He remembered his father slim and young and handsome. What was ahead for him? The stiffening of his joints. Poor circulation, the hardening of his arteries, senility, if his father lived long enough. Tears began to fill the poet's eyes as he thought against his will that his father reminded him of a samovar, especially in winter. Round, short, thick necked, short armed, with the steam issuing from his thin lips and pinched nostrils like tea boiling over” (p. 208)

The samovar, or tea boiler, used to be a fixture in Russian homes and is still associated with the traditional Russian way of life



Symbolism may reflect a specific cultural code, or be unique to the narrative in question. In Killens's novel, the contrast between the colors black and white carries a great deal of meaning. In this case, the symbolism is culturally predetermined



*Great Black Russian* features a number of mistakes of fact, e.g., the family name “Oshnikovna.” Question: will these errors disrupt a reader’s SOD?

“When Pushkin ran head-on into a problem with GABRILIAD, he fought it for a while, and if it did not submit, he turned to another poem inspired by his visit to the Fountain of Bakshisarai in the Caucasus” (p. 145)

“There are rumors of revolt in Kazan and Rostov and Uzbekistan [*sic!*]” (p. 287). Imagine George Washington saying in 1790, “There are rumors of revolt in Chile and Argentina”



And one last thing...

When forming a judgment about *Great Black Russian*, in addition to the elements listed above think about whether the novel is convincing in its depiction of Pushkin's relationship with his family, friends, and lovers. And also, enemies!