CHAPTER 5

Turgenev and the Woman Question: Layering Barriers

Turgenev is, perhaps more than any author, the writer of Russia's women.1

Introduction

Ivan Turgenev has traditionally been viewed as one of the nineteenth-century Russian male writers most sympathetic towards the position of women, particularly in his depiction of positive heroines such as Elena Stakhova of On the Eve. However, in what is almost a direct inversion of work that has identified Tolstoy as “crypto-feminist”,2 Turgenev has come to occupy an uneasy position amongst feminist literary critics. In her observation that “the role of many female characters in male-authored Russian literature is to act as the Other”, Marsh has noted that “this phenomenon finds its most widespread expression in the novels of Turgenev”.3 Indeed, not only does he depict enigmatic heroines such as Asya, and Zinaida from First Love, it might be argued that Turgenev’s long line of “strong women”, such as Natalya (Rudin), Liza (Home Of the Gentry), Elena, and later incarnations such as Marianna (Virgin Soil [1877]) are also ‘other’, because they act as a foil to the superfluous man, with whom they fall in love.4 Heldt has deemed Turgenev’s idealisation of these positive heroines to be “terrible perfection”, which was “frightening to men who could not match it in ‘manly’ action and inhibiting to women who were supposed to incarnate it, or else”.5

It was against this background that my previous work sought to clarify Turgenev’s position in the debate on the Woman Question.6 This earlier study, which adopted the Neo-Formalist approach used by Michael O’Toole and Joe

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1 Costlow, “Speaking the Sorrow of Women”, 328.
4 Gheith refers to this type of heroine as the “necessary woman”. Gheith, “The Superfluous Man and the Necessary Woman”, 226.
5 Heldt, Terrible Perfection, 5.
Andrew, looked at the degree of Turgenev’s ‘feminism’ in the many different female character types to be found in his fiction. In its analysis of the “Strong Woman”,8 the “femme fatale”, the “mysterious heroine” and the “innocent heroine”9 types, it argued for a re-evaluation of the way in which many of Turgenev’s women were labelled, not least because his more interesting female characters10 are an amalgamation of more than one type. The present study will build upon my previous work, by applying the concept of textual, actual and perceived barriers to provide a re-vision of Turgenev and the Woman Question.

My previous work sought to place Turgenev in a Russian context, by way of comparisons with his contemporaries, especially Chernyshevsky, Khvoshchinskaya and Tolstoy. Within this context, it was concluded – perhaps unsurprisingly – that Turgenev represented the ‘middle way’. Although Turgenev’s place in Russian discussions of the Woman Question will be considered, this chapter will aim to broaden the focus, by considering Turgenev as part of a wider European context. This is a particularly useful approach to Turgenev, a truly ‘European’ writer, who travelled extensively throughout Europe and lived in both France and Germany for extended periods. Furthermore, and as observed in the Introduction, he was personally acquainted with both Eliot and Storm. The current chapter, therefore, is vital in linking this book together as a whole.

Although most of Turgenev’s works (which include novels, short stories, poems and plays) have scope for discussion of the Woman Question, it is not possible to go into the analytical detail required by looking at such a large number and variety of texts. To this end, this chapter will focus upon those generally considered to be Turgenev’s finest: Asya, Home of the Gentry, First Love, On the Eve and Fathers and Children. It would certainly be rewarding, however, to explore Turgenev’s later works, particularly with reference to his

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7 This approach considers works in terms of plot, narrative structure, point of view, theme, characterisation, setting and symbol. For an example with a feminist perspective, see Andrew, Women in Russian Literature.

8 The term “Strong Woman” was first coined by Vera Dunham Sandomirsky. See her “The Strong-Woman Motif”, in The Transformation of Russian Society: Aspects of Social Change Since 1861, ed. Cyril Black, Cambridge and Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1960, 459–483. Variations of this type are the “New Woman”, the “radical heroine”, the “emancipated woman” and the “necessary woman”, as discussed by Gheith (see note 4, above).

9 Marsh has identified how the “innocent heroine” may be seen as a Russian variant of the “Angel in the House” in nineteenth-century English literature. See Marsh, “An Image of Their Own?” 10.

10 For example, Irina in Smoke (1866) and Mariya Polozova in Spring Torrents.