
Pavel Korchagin as the Epitome of a Socialist Realist Hero

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The discussion of Socialist Realism often revolves around the discussion of Maxim Gorky's 1906 novel *Mother*. Often called the prototype of Socialist Realism, this novel introduced concepts and ideas that would later be fully developed into Socialist Realist literature. This paper will examine the development of these ideas within the work of Nikolai Ostrovsky.

HOW THE STEEL WAS TEMPERED

His life and story within the text embody the requirements of a Socialist Realist protagonist, of which are outlined six. Ostrovsky's story furthermore embodies all four principles of Socialist Realism, as defined by Victor Terras. This paper examines how Pavel Korchagin fulfills these requirements and represents the ideal Socialist Realist protagonist and also compares Maxim Gorky's *Mother*, written in 1906, to Ostrovsky's work within the context of both respective works' contributions to the development of Socialist Realism. Though there are notable differences between *Mother* and later SR works, the depiction of its main characters, Nilovna Vlasova and Pavel Vlasov, from workers to revolutionaries would be the prototype for future protagonists.

Socialist Realism, as defined by Victor Terras (1992), consists of four aspects:

1. Partiinost "Partymindedness"—the notion that every artistic act is also a political act, that the source of all knowledge is the party.
2. Ideinost "Idea-mindedness" the "idea" of the artwork should embody the current high priority: party slogan (reconstructing a ruined factory, abolishing drunkenness, building the Moscow metro, destroying the fascist enemy).
3. Iassovost, "classmindedness," both acknowledges the social-class origin of art and obliges it to further the struggle of the proletariat. It became less important after 1936, when the new Soviet Constitution declared that the USSR had become a classless society.
4. Narodnost, "people- or folkmindedness," requires art to be accessible and appealing to the masses by drawing on their traditions, language, melodies, rhythms, and values. Because the Soviet Union was a multinational state, narodnost authorized considerable cultural diversity.

These ideas serve as a framework for the development of Socialist Realist literature, however there are several other "requirements" for a SR protagonist.

First, the protagonist must be one who comes from the working class, which ensures that the protagonist is representative of the majority of the population. Second, the Socialist Realist hero must be an extremely dedicated and diligent worker. Their labor is the lifeblood that fuels the revolution, and they must always have a strong sense of work and duty to the party, no matter the job they have. Third, a Socialist Realist hero must also forsake personal love for love of the party, love of the revolution. Love between family members and romantic love is either entirely absent or is rejected in favor of the "higher" call of loving one's party and their duty to it. Fourth, a Socialist Realist protagonist must be heroic and achieve success against the impossible. Regardless of circumstances, the hero will always be victorious against a physical enemy during times of war, or during illness and disease. Fifth, the Socialist Realist hero typically gives up their life for the cause., whether e from a fight against the enemies of the party or an illness. This death is used to "inspire" the masses to be willing to give up their lives for the cause as well. If not killed in battle, illness or unavoidable circumstance kill them in the end. Sixth, the enemy in a Socialist Realist story is intentionally dehumanized. Whether a person or an idea, the antagonist of such a work will almost always be a one-dimensional, cruel, evil, and sometimes cowardly antagonist.

Considering the four pillars of Socialist Realism as defined by Victor Terras and the aspects of a Socialist Realist protagonist, the literary genre of Socialist Realism portrays an inherently "non-realist" portrayal of life. Rather than truthfully portray the actions of its protagonists in a realistic fashion, its intended purpose is to be used as a propaganda tool.

PAVEL KORCHAGIN—FULFILLING THE REQUIREMENTS OF A SOCIALIST REALIST HERO

Ostrovsky's main character, Pavel Korchagin, and his plot throughout the story is largely based on the author's own life and experiences. Many aspects of Pavels character and personality fulfill the specific requirements of the socialist realist hero outlined previously, as well

as aspects of the story that align with the four pillars of Socialist Realism. This section analyzes the character of Pavel Korchagin, and how he fulfills the Socialist Realist character requirements.

Requirement 1—Comes from the Working Class

Pavel comes from the working class, which is established in the very beginning, where from the age of 12, he works at a scullery maintaining the samovars: “Thus began his life of toil. Never had Pavka exerted himself as much as on that first day at work. He realized that this was not home where he could afford to disobey his mother. The cross-eyed waiter had made it quite plain that if he did not do as he was told, he would suffer for it” (Ostrovsky 30). In typical Socialist Realist fashion, Pavel is proud of his status as a worker. Ostrovsky also establishes the clear ideal of only workers as “good” as compared to “non-workers”: “Pavel, his first day at work having passed without mishap, hurried home with a sense of having honestly earned his rest.” Now he too was a worker, and no one could accuse him of being a parasite” (Ostrovsky 32).

Requirement 2—Hard Worker

From the very beginning of the story, the reader is introduced to Korchagin’s unwavering work ethic even from a young age during his time working at the scullery, fulfilling this requirement of a Socialist Realist protagonist: “By now Pavel was receiving ten rubles instead of eight. He had grown taller and broader in these two years, and many were the trials that fell to his lot... Pavel’s fiery temper would have lost him the job long since had it not been for his tremendous capacity for hard work. For he could work harder than anyone else and he never seemed to get tired” (Ostrovsky 36). This establishes Korchagin’s work ethic that will continue to be an aspect of his character throughout the remainder of his life, including his job at the powerplant, his service in the Red Army, and his job at the Cheka. Even towards the end of his life and despite his illnesses, he insists on working. “I am going to insist on being sent back to work. The doctors have written all sorts of nonsense about me and the comrades are trying to make me cure myself endlessly” (Ostrovsky 591).

Requirement 3—Forsaking Personal Love for Love of the Party

Korchagin’s love for the party largely supplants both his love for his family, particularly his mother, and romantic love. Upon returning home, he leaves almost immediately again to fight, at the disapproval of his mother: “You boys never tell your old mother anything. Artem went and got married without a word to me, and you’re worse

than him in that respect. I only see you when you get yourself crippled...” (Ostrovsky 403). Similarly, Korchagin forsakes any romantic love, finding his love for Tonya has diminished upon reuniting with her: “Tonya, we have gone over this before. You know, of course, that I loved you, and even now my love might return, but for that you must be with us... For I shall always put the Party first, and you and my other loved ones second” (Ostrovsky 300).

Requirement 4—Heroism and Success in Impossible Odds

Korchagin’s heroism in his early life, in war, and in his later life fulfill this requirement. During the German occupation of Shepetovka, a young Korchagin attacks a soldier who was transporting Zhukhrai, saving him from arrest. “When the yellow-moustached soldier came abreast of him, Pavel made a sudden lunge at him, and seizing hold of the rifle struck the barrel down. The bayonet hit a stone with a grating sound. The attack caught the soldier unawares, and for a moment he was dumbfounded” (Ostrovsky 154-155).

Later on, during the Polish-Soviet War, Korchagin is commended for his bravery and wounded in battle multiple times:

For a year now Pavel Korchagin had travelled up and down his native land, riding on machine-gun carriages and gun caissons or astride a small grey mare with a nick in her ear. He was a grown man now, matured and hardened by suffering and privation... the indomitable determination to fight for the power of their class, he had marched over the length and breadth of his native land and only twice had the storm swept on without him the first time when he was wounded in the hip, and the second, when in the bitterly cold in February of 1920 he sweltered in the sticky heat of typhus” (Ostrovsky 257-258).

In his civilian life, Korchagin helps his companion Anna during a robbery: “Korchagin staggered back and began to run sideways keeping his eyes on his assailant. The ruffian, seeing that the youngster was still afraid that he would shoot, turned and made for the ruined house. Korchagin’s hand flew to his pocket. If only he could be quick enough! He swung round, thrust his left hand forward, took swift aim and fired” (Ostrovsky 454).

Furthermore, the wounds that Korchagin sustains during these exploits, he is able to recover from, no matter how dire the situation seems: “For the fourth time he crossed the borderline of death and came back to life. It was a whole month, however, before he was able to rise from his bed. Gaunt and pale, he tottered feebly across the room on his shaky legs, clinging to the wall for support” (Ostrovsky 396).

Requirement 5—Giving their Life for the Cause

This is the only requirement that Korchagin does not fulfill within the story. Despite this absence, and with the context of Ostrovsky's life (which heavily mirrors Korchagin's), he does continue to work until the end of his "life" in terms of his ability to do physical work. Struck blind and with a debilitating disease, Korchagin is bed bound, though despite this, finds a way to continue working, repeating to himself the following phrase: "Have you done everything you can to break out of the steel trap and return to the ranks, to make your life useful?" (Ostrovsky 635). Korchagin continues his work by writing a memoir about his time in the war. Though in the novel, it is not revealed whether he died afterwards, Ostrovsky—who suffered nearly identical circumstances—died the day of this novel's publication (Ostrovsky 4). Thus, despite not dying a death in battle, Ostrovsky and by proxy Korchagin die martyr's deaths, working until the very end.

Requirement 6—Dehumanization of the Enemy

The dehumanization of the enemy can come in two forms; the enemy is depicted as quite literally lacking human features or is portrayed in such a way that highlights negative traits such as cowardice, fear, trepidation, etc. Simon Petlyura, the leader of Ukrainian Cossacks is depicted as the opposite what a military leader should be—brave and inspiring: "There was nothing especially warlike about the figure of Simon Petlyura. As a matter of fact, he did not look like a military man at all... Petlyura delivered a ten-minute speech to the troops. The speech was unconvincing. Petlyura, evidently tired from the road, spoke without enthusiasm" (Ostrovsky 190-191).

The enemy will also often commit violent, often barbaric acts such as rape and murder, as was the case describing the aftermath of Petlyura's occupation in Shepetovka:

It is hard to tell whether those were the more fortunate who were left to live with souls desolated, in the agony of shame and humiliation, gnawed by in-describable grief, grief for near and dear ones who would never return. Indifferent to all this in the narrow alleys lay the lacerated, tormented, broken bodies of young girls with arms thrown back in convulsive gestures of agony. (Ostrovsky 137)

FOUR PILLARS OF SOCIALIST REALISM

In addition to the protagonist's fulfilling of the previous requirements, the story contains elements that fulfill all four elements of Socialist Realism according to Terras.

Partiinost

By fulfilling the requirements for the Socialist Realist protagonist, all the actions he undertook, challenges he

faced, and hardships endured, serve as a political message to the reader—that one must give their life for the cause. Korchagin's "Dearest Possession Speech" towards the end of the novel recapitulates this message to the reader and reaffirms the purpose of SR literature as propaganda:

Man's dearest possession is life, and it is given to him to live but once. He must live so as to feel no torturing regrets for years without purpose, never know the burning shame of a mean and petty past; so live that, dying, he can say: all my life, all my strength were given to the finest cause in all the world—the fight for the Liberation of Mankind. And one must make use of every moment of life, lest some sudden illness or tragic accident cut it short" (Ostrovsky 402-403).

Ideinost

Korchagin embodies the high priorities of the party at that time, including his resolve to quit smoking: "Pavel announced that he was going to give up smoking, which unhealthy habit he had acquired practically in his childhood" (Ostrovsky 472). In his speech at the Solomenk Hostomotel, he praises the members for stopping lighter production: "I understand that the Solomenka Komsomol has thirty per cent more members than before, and that they've stopped making cigarette lighters in the workshops and yards..." (Ostrovsky 422).

Klassovost

Written before *Klassovost* was de-emphasized and the Soviet Union was declared a "classless society", instances of this theme remain in the novel, such as when Korchagin describes his apprehension of Tonya's upbringing when he first met her: "Pavel had grown up in poverty and want, and he was hostile to anyone whom he considered to be wealthy. And so his feeling for Tonya was tinged with apprehension and misgiving; Tonya was not one of his own crowd, she was not simple and easy to understand like Galina, the stonemason's daughter, for instance" (Ostrovsky 107-108).

Narodnost

Born in Ukraine, Korchagin's Ukrainian roots are a theme, albeit minor, present within the text. His affinity for, and skill with, the accordion is one such instance of appealing to the masses with cultural diversity: "One giant of a fellow, seated on the back of a machine-gun carrier, his cap pushed to the back of his head, was playing an accordion... unbelievably wide red riding breeches who was dancing a mad hopak in the centre of the ring" (Ostrovsky 267-68). This skill even plays a role in Korchagin's request to join a new unit, so that he can continue to fight in combat." Korchagin now rode on the

right flank of one of the squadrons in place of Kulyabko, the lamented accordionist. He had been enrolled in the squadron on the collective request of the men, who had not wanted to part with such an excellent accordion player” (Ostrovsky 272).

Happiness through Labor

An analysis of Korchagin’s character would be incomplete without exploring his view on happiness derived from labor. Referring to his “Man’s Dearest Possession” speech, Korchagin believes that the greatest happiness a person can achieve is to work for the cause. Even later in his life, while bedbound, Korchagin is given hope with the idea that he can return to work: “You have great happiness in store for you. Comrade Pavel. I firmly believe that your dream of returning to the ranks will soon materialize” (Ostrovsky 632). The pursuit of labor is an element that cannot be understated in understanding Korchagin’s mentality. Throughout his entire life in the novel, Korchagin’s unwavering desire to work drives him.

COMPARISON TO MAXIM GORKY’S *MOTHER*

Written in 1906, Maxim Gorky’s *Mother* can be considered a prototype of Socialist Realist literature. Many of the same ideas and themes present in *How the Steel was Tempered* are also present in *Mother*; though there are some notable differences between the two works.

Similarities

Written in pre-revolutionary Russia, Gorky’s *Mother* establishes many of the guidelines and principles that would develop into later SR literature, one of the most notable is the development of the protagonist, Pavel Vlasov. Like Korchagin, Vlasov comes from a poor (proletariat) upbringing and begins working at a very young age: “He worked faithfully, without intermission and without incurring fines. He was taciturn, and his eyes, blue and large like his mother’s, looked out discontentedly. He did not buy a gun, nor did he go a-fishing; but he gradually began to avoid the beaten path trodden by all” (Gorky 5). Vlasov, however, becomes a hard worker and a revolutionary, commended for his dedication to work and the socialist cause, despite being arrested and imprisoned. “Everyone ought to help you, for your son is perishing for the public cause. He is a fine chap, your son is! They all say so, every blessed soul of them. And they all pity him” (Gorky 38).

Nilovna Vlasova is Pavel’s mother. Initially, she is a timid and apprehensive woman, unsure of her son’s revolutionary activities “Pavel remembered that in his father’s lifetime [Nilvona] had remained unnoticed in the house... Her heavy body, broken down with long years of toil and the beatings of her husband, moved about

noiselessly and inclined to one side, as if she were in constant fear of knocking up against something” (Gorky 4). By the end of the novel, she has grown to fully accept not only Pavel’s revolutionary activities but becomes one herself: “Nilovna occasionally procured illegal books, proclamations, and newspapers for her. The distribution of literature, in fact, became the mother’s occupation... She was the first to enter into conversations with strangers, fearlessly drawing attention to herself by her kind, sociable talk and the confident manner of an experienced person who has seen and heard much” (Gorky 115). Thus, Nilovna Vlasova’s and Pavel Vlasov’s conversion into diligent revolutionaries is characteristic of SR protagonists.

Differences

Both Korchagin’s and Pavel Vlasov’s climactic speeches epitomize the propagandist nature of Socialist Realist literature, though with different intentions. Whereas Korchagin’s speech is a call for all people to give their strength and lives to the workers’ cause and “continue” the revolution, Vlasov’s speech (consistent with the setting of pre-revolutionary Russia) is instead a call on the proletariat to begin the revolution: “Our ideas grow; they flare up ever more dazzling; they seize hold of the mass of the people, organizing them for the war of freedom. The consciousness of their great role unites all the working men of the world into one soul” (Gorky 173).

Another theme within *Mother* that would not be present in Ostrovsky’s work is personal love. Throughout *Mother*, Nilovna Vlasova’s love for, and dedication to, her son and later to the other revolutionaries is the primary force driving her conversion: “Underneath all these emotions an almost burdensome feeling was slowly growing of the fullness of her love for her son—a strained desire to please him, to be near to his heart” (Gorky 254). Thus, her personal love is not forsaken for the revolution, as is the case with Korchagin.

CONCLUSION

The exploration of Socialist Realism within the context of Ostrovsky’s *How the Steel was Tempered* reveals the embodiment of the principles of Socialist Realist literature through the main character, Pavel Korchagin. With his humble beginnings as a worker, his growth into a hero driven by love for work, and the party epitomize the principles that Socialist Realism promotes. Compared to Maxim Gorky’s *Mother*, the similarities and differences between the two works are apparent. Gorky’s work would set the principles that would be developed further in Ostrovsky’s novel, such as the development of the protagonists and the forsaking of love. Korchagin’s character stands as a testament to the true purpose of Socialist Realism—propaganda. Despite this purpose, Korchagin’s

dedication to work and commitment to revolutionary ideas encapsulates the unique and interesting life of Ostrovsky himself.

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