Hanna Paulouskaya, "Entry on: Dear Miss Elena [Дорогая Елена Сергеевна (Dorogaia Elena Sergeevna)] by Liudmila Razumovskaia", peer-reviewed by Elżbieta Olechowska and Susan Deacy. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2019). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/854. Entry version as of July 12, 2026.

Liudmila Razumovskaia

Dear Miss Elena [Дорогая Елена Сергеевна (Dorogaia Elena Sergeevna)]

Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) (1989)

TAGS: Antigone Cicero

We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

General information	
Title of the work	Dear Miss Elena [Дорогая Елена Сергеевна (Dorogaia Elena Sergeevna)]
Country of the First Edition	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR)
Country/countries of popularity	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), Russia
Original Language	Russian
First Edition Date	1989
First Edition Details	Людмила Разумовская, "Дорогая Елена Сергеевна" [Dear Miss Elena (Dorogaia Elena Sergeevna)], in *Сад без земли: пьесы* [The Landless Garden: Plays (Sad bez zemli: p'esy)], Leningrad: Iskusstvo: Leningradskoe otdelenie, 1989, 53–94.
ISBN	5210004414
Genre	Drama
Target Audience	Young adults (young adults)
Author of the Entry	Hanna Paulouskaya, University of Warsaw, hannapa@al.uw.edu.pl
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Creators

Liudmila Razumovskaia , b. 1946
(Author)

Liudmila Razumovskaia is a Russian playwright best known for her play *Dear Miss Elena* written in 1980. Born in Riga, she studied at the Leningrad State Institute of Theatre, Music and Cinema (now Russian State Institute of Performing Arts) at the theatrical studies department (1974), and at the Russian Institute of Theatre Arts (1979). She often emphasizes that she wanted to become an actress, she started to write dramas by accident. Her plays usually reveal problems of society, especially problems of women. They were staged at many theatres in Russia, Europe, and the United States, however they were banned for several years in 1980s in the USSR as too provocative for the Soviet stage and misrepresenting the Soviet reality. She also wrote a play *Medea* but it is not addressed to children and youths.

Sources:

Elena Dobriakova, Людмила Разумовская “Вспомните, как мучился Раскольников…” [Liudmila Razumovskaia, “Recall the suffering of Raskol’nikov…”], Nevskoe vremia, April 6, 2007, nvspb.ru (accessed: September 30, 2019)

John Freedman, *Interview with Lyudmila Razumovskaya*, Chicago, 1990, Blogs and Stray Articles, November 13, 2018, johnfreedmanarchive.wordpress.com (accessed: September 30, 2019)

Profile at kino-teatr.ru (accessed: September 30, 2019)

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Additional information

Adaptations

The screen version of the play was directed by Eldar Riazanov in 1988 at the Mosfilm film studio in Moscow.

Дорогая Елена Сергеевна [Dear Miss Elena], dir. Eldar Riazanov, 89 min.

Translation

English: *Dear Miss Elena*, trans. Schmidt, Seattle, WA: Rain City Projects, 1992.

German: *Liebe Jelena Sergejewna: Stück in zwei Teile*n, trans. Susanne Rödel, Berlin: Henschel, 1988.

French: *Chère Elena,* trans. Joëlle et Marc Blondel.

Summary

This is a play in two acts for five actors. The characters are: a teacher of mathematics, Miss Elena (or Elena Sergeevna in Russian), and four pupils of the final year (the 10th grade) – three boys and a girl – Volodia, Vitia, Pasha and Lialia. The action takes place in a flat where Elena lives.

The pupils come to their teacher pretending they want to wish her a happy birthday. The real reason for their visit is revealed later in the play. They bring her flowers and an expensive gift. As the play progresses, we learn that the students are taking graduation exams. Having problems with the mathematics test, they came to the teacher in order to get access to the exams they wrote, as they are stored in a school safe under her care. They have prepared new versions to replace the original ones. Actually, only Vitia and Pasha have problems with the test. Vitia, being a weak student, has written nothing and needs a “good” or at least “satisfactory” mark in order to be accepted at the forestry academy. Pasha is an excellent pupil fond of philology, the winner of a competition on interpretation of Dostoyevsky’s novels, but he has problems with mathematics. He made several mistakes, but needs an “excellent” mark to get into a prestigious university. Lialia is a girlfriend of Pasha and is present out of curiosity. Volodia seems to be the organiser of the event. He does not have problems with the test. He makes an experiment and does it

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"just for sport", to exercise his diplomatic skills for achieving a goal (p. 79) as he wants to enroll at the MGIMO university (Moscow State Institute of International Relations), one of the most prestigious colleges in the USSR.

The pupils use different methods to get the key from Elena. They start with asking her a favour and try to persuade, to bribe, to threaten, and later they turn to brutality and violence. During the whole night Elena behaves as a person believing in and practicing her ideals of honour. However, the students are not convinced and detect something false in what she says. They represent another generation with a new "business" ideology*. It seems that it is money and good position in the society that are important for them. Most of the students are well-read, they discuss the problem of origin of evil (p. 61). Volodia calls Elena a contemporary Antigone, a martyr type idealist (p. 69–70, 73). According to his theory, to defeat Antigone, one have to commit violence, and violence not against Antigone, but against another person in front of her (p. 70). This is supposed to reveal "the real face of life" to the idealist, as all such people "have a very vague idea of reality" (p. 71)**.

As a result, in the finale of the play, Volodia stages an attempt to rape Lialia (and we do not know how far he is ready to go in this "staging"). Lialia is terrified. Pasha, having given his permission for this, is not able to help her. Disoriented, Vitia helps Volodia in the beginning, but then frees Lialia. Having seen this, Elena gives the pupils the key and locks herself in the bathroom. As she does not reappear, the possibility of her suicide is implied. The last words of the play is a cry of Lialia: "Miss Elena… they haven't taken it [i.e. the key]… haven't taken… haven't taken it… Miss Elena…"

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* More on this in comparison with other Russian literary texts see: Russel, Robert, "The Tragic Vision of Liudmila Razumovskaia", *The Slavonic and East European Review* 7.4 (1993): 656–663, jstor.org (accessed: September 30, 2019).

** Паша: Вообще все идеалисты имеют весьма смутное представление о действительности.

Володя: Правильно! Надо открыть ей глаза на мир. Обнажить, так сказать, дно. Показать ей реальное лицо жизни. В нашем лице. (*Co*

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смехом.) И пусть это лицо обернется ей волчьей мордой! Грубо говоря, нужно сыграть подонков.

Analysis

The text is built as a dialogue with five participants. As the major part of the play discusses contemporary ideology and morals as well as their interpretations, it is similar to philosophical dialogues from antiquity. To confirm this, one of the participants (Pasha) is compared to Cicero at some point of the debate (p. 83). Unfortunately, the dialogue between the protagonists is not real, as both sides are unable to listen and understand each other. Symbolically, at some point, Elena closes her ears and mutters some idealistic verses of Pushkin, not to be able to hear her opponents (p. 83).

There are two main sides of the discussion: Elena and the students. They represent different generations and different ideologies. Elena identifies with the generation of the 1960s (p. 80). She listens to singer-songwriters (bards) popular in the culture of the Thaw (Bulat Okudzhava, Novella Matveeva) (p. 56), loves art (for example, she has an album of Marc Chagall, who was banned in the USSR until the 1970s) (p. 77). Her main values are honour, decency, kindness, truth, openness, and beauty. These values were common for the late Soviet ideology that tried to revive the ideals of the communist revolution corrupted by Stalin and his henchmen. An attitude to life was formed at that time that fostered heroism and dignity and was called “romantic” in Russian. Profit and practicality were understood as “low” motives and were stigmatized. The worst vice in the teacher’s opinion is подлость [*baseness*] (p. 66), which in Russian means inferiority of thought, deception, and betrayal.

On the other hand, the youth see hypocrisy of the society (p. 73, 83) and does not consent to believe in the high standards that are not supported by real life (pp. 66–67). They consider the society as being bureaucratic and false, and are not ready to be heroes and to sacrifice their lives for somebody’s ideals (p. 83). The possibility of sacrifice was real for them, as students finishing high school were 17–18 years old, and the military duty was mandatory for boys 18 years old. As the Soviet-Afghan war was at its peak, young people were sent to the battlefields. The easiest way to postpone military service was to enroll at a higher educational institution. Thus the graduation marks could be crucial for the fate of the students. The protagonists mention this problem to their teacher (p. 63), but she replies with a standard

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phrase that “a man’s duty is to defend his homeland” (p. 63).

The young also promote material benefits and their longing for “dolce vita”. Such attitude is perceived by Elena as *мещанство* [philistinism] (p. 84) and was condemned as well.

The young people are arguing for the relativity of morality, giving an example of great personalities, such as Peter the Great (p. 79). Volodia presents himself as the Shakespearean Iago and expresses his pleasure in usage of power (p. 80, 81).

The play is highly intertextual. There are many biblical quotations, references to Dostoyevsky, Pushkin and contemporary poets. Volodia refers to Shakespeare’s *Otello* (p. 80), Lialia says that she “reads Nabokov in English” (p. 57). However the key reference from my point of view is comparison of Elena to Antigone made by Volodia (pp. 69–70). At some point he “diagnoses” his teacher as having an “Antigone complex”:

> "It’s when an idealistic perception of reality gets elevated to a principle. When any force against your personality or your ideals provokes heroic resistance. There’s a really remarkable phenomenon called proportional dependence: the more pressure you apply, the more active and intense the resistance gets. This is the kind of character that produces iron heroes in wartime and leaders of revolutions. But in everyday life they mostly end up simple-minded moralising freaks, heads in the clouds, holy fools, whom nobody takes seriously and only raise a laugh."*

The explanation of Volodia is based on contemporary ideology and only vaguely corresponds to Sophocles’ tragedy. He uses a concept grounded in stereotypical understanding of Antigone as a person who goes all the way in the name of ideals, and contextualises her with metaphors of a war hero or a revolutionary leader. He does not bring up the plot of the tragedy, assuming it is well known. Let us compare the play with the ancient tragedy to see if there are other similarities.

The plays focus on the confrontation between the old and the new “laws” or rather morals. Elena is traditionally an advocate of the old

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morals. The new morals are cruel and inhuman, and the audience sympathise with the old ones.

Contrary to Sophocles the old laws are not divine, which is natural from the point of view of the atheistic culture of the USSR. However the play is full of references to Christ or the Bible that are usually brought to the discussion by the younger generation (pp. 61, 75–76, 81, 82, 83, 84, 88). This would be impossible for a traditional Soviet play, but was permissible for the texts of the Perestroika period. Therefore, respect for the sacred text is characteristic for the young people, similarly to Antigone of Sophocles, although in the work of Razumovskaia the young people are on the opposite side.

Contrary to Sophocles the protagonists do not belong to one family. However parents of all children are mentioned and shortly described in the play. They, mostly, appear to have the same ideals as their children, which eliminates the generational aspect of the conflict.

The correlations are also changed because Antigone, Elena, is a generation older than her main enemy, Volodia, and, theoretically, it is she who obtains the power. However in practice, she is deprived of authority and imprisoned in her own flat.

Similar to Sophocles' play, the conflict is focused on the issue of gender, which is typical for Razumovskaia in general. Elena is not young, but she is still unmarried and appears as a daughter (because she lives with her mother, who is currently in hospital). The question of marriage is raised in the play and Elena is advised how to live her life, to be happy and get married (by Lialia (pp. 58, 72–73, 86) and Volodia (p. 81)). The teacher is an independent professional, but her position in society is perceived by the students as low because she is poor and single (p. 58, 67).

The gender issue is raised again, when the rape attempt is made (89–92). It starts with Volodia's line to Lialia: "Sit quietly and stay seated. Understood? The men will decide. We have a patriarchate now." Pasha has given his consent to violence because he wanted to appear more authoritative than Lialia who commanded him to go home. Vitia seems to believe that it is just a play. And it is Elena who stops the rape by giving the key to the pupils.

As the play concentrates on the moment when the protagonists make their decision, the audience is waiting for people to change their

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mind. And there are a few moments when Lialia (pp. 58, 63, 69, 87–89) or Pasha (p. 69, 87) are urging the rest to step back, but they continue their play moving from dialogue to violence and cruelty.

Although the behaviour of the pupils is cruel and the audience is sympathising with Elena, some of the arguments of the youths seem to be true and important for understanding the society. Thus the play and its characters are not easily interpreted, which is true also for Sophocles' *Antigone*.

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* This is a quotation from the translation of Zoltan Schmidt and Roger Downey: Ludmilla Razumovskaya, *Dear Miss Elena*, trans. Zoltan Schmidt and Roger Downey, Seattle: Rain City Projects, 1992, 17.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Antigone Cicero
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Authority Conflict Gender Gender, female Hierarchy Intertextuality Morality Oppression Rape Relationships Sacrifice School Society Suicide Teachers Teenagers Tricksters Values Violence

Further Reading

Reissner, Eberhard, *Das russische Drama der achtziger Jahre: Schmerzvoller Abschied von der großen Illusion, Arbeiten und Texte zur Slavistik 56*, München: Verlag Otto Sagner in Kommission, 1992, 101–105.

Russel, Robert, "The Tragic Vision of Liudmila Razumovskaia", *The Slavonic and East European Review* 7.4 (1993): 656–675, jstor.org (accessed: September 30, 2019).

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Addenda

images.stetson.edu(accessed: September 30, 2019)

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