

# The Bridegroom

Alexander Pushkin  
*translated by D. M. Thomas*

Illustration by  
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The Bridegroom

# Before You Read The Poem

## The Bridegroom

### Make the Connection Quickwrite

Suppose you knew someone who had witnessed a horrifying crime and was afraid to talk about it. Write a few sentences telling what you would advise the witness to do.

### Literary Focus Climax

The most exciting and suspenseful part of a plot is called the **climax**. This is when we find out for certain how the characters' problems are going to be resolved. You probably have seen movies in which the climax takes the form of a terrifying life-or-death struggle between the good character and the bad one. As you read this poem about violence and betrayal, you will feel the buildup of suspense before the climax is reached. What will happen to the young girl?

### Background Literature and Folklore

"The Bridegroom" is based on an old folk tale about a young woman who witnesses a terrible crime. She is silent about the crime—until she realizes she is to become the next victim.

#### SKILLS FOCUS

**Literary Skills**  
Understand  
climax.

**Reading Skills**  
Understand  
cause and  
effect.

### Reading Skills Understand Cause and Effect

A plot is a series of causes and their effects. A **cause** makes something happen. An **effect** is the result of a cause. That cause might be an event, a decision, or a situation. To find a cause, ask yourself, "Why did this happen?" To find an effect, ask, "What's the result of this event?" In this poem, for example, you learn at the start that Natasha has been missing for three days. You ask yourself, "Why did this happen?" Look for the answer later in the poem.



Set design for *Firebird* by Natalia Goncharova.  
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## Meet the Writer

# Alexander Pushkin

### The Father of Russian Literature

Russians read, admire, and quote **Alexander Pushkin** (1799–1837) as the English do William Shakespeare. A master of poetry, drama, and fiction, Pushkin is often called the father of modern Russian literature. Even in his earliest writings, Pushkin focused on Russian settings and folk tales. "The Bridegroom," first published in 1825 (under the Russian title "Zhenikh"), is one of many Pushkin works based on motifs from Russian folklore. As his talents developed, Pushkin became known for his realistic characters and simple, natural language, which were unlike the characters and language of any Russian writer before him.

Pushkin was born in Moscow to a noble family that had lost most of its wealth. He was especially proud of his African great-grandfather, Abram Hannibal, who served as a general under the Russian ruler Peter the Great.

Pushkin's love of stories and reading began early. His father had a large library, and the boy's beloved nanny kept young Pushkin entertained with old tales. He had his first poem published at age fifteen. By the time he left school, Pushkin was viewed as a rival to the leading writers of the day.

Pushkin's first job, at eighteen, was at the foreign office in the Russian capital of



*Alexander Pushkin* (19th century)  
by W. Troponin.

St. Petersburg. However, he was soon banned from the city for writing poetry critical of Russia's czar. Officials of the Russian government kept tabs on Pushkin for the rest of his life.

In 1831, Pushkin married a beautiful woman named Natalya Goncharova. She became friends with a French nobleman, Baron Georges d'Anthes. D'Anthes was so in love with Pushkin's wife that he married her sister in order to be closer to her. In 1837, Pushkin challenged d'Anthes to a duel over his wife's honor. Like one of his own Romantic characters, Pushkin was fatally wounded in the duel. All Russia mourned the loss of a national hero.

# The Bridegroom

For three days Natasha,  
The merchant's daughter,  
Was missing. The third night,  
She ran in, distraught.

5 Her father and mother  
Plied her with questions.  
She did not hear them,  
She could hardly breathe.

Stricken with foreboding  
10 They pleaded, got angry,  
But still she was silent;  
At last they gave up.  
Natasha's cheeks regained  
Their rosy color.

15 And cheerfully again  
She sat with her sisters.

Once at the shingle-gate  
She sat with her friends  
—And a swift troika  
20 Flashed by before them;  
A handsome young man  
Stood driving the horses;  
Snow and mud went flying,  
Splashing the girls.

25 He gazed as he flew past,  
And Natasha gazed.  
He flew on. Natasha froze.  
Headlong she ran home.  
“It was he! It was he!”  
30 She cried. “I know it!  
I recognized him! Papa,  
Mama, save me from him!”

Full of grief and fear,  
They shake their heads, sighing.

4. **distraught** (di·strô't') *adj.*:  
extremely troubled.

6. **plied** (plīd) *v.*: addressed  
urgently and persistently.

9. **foreboding** (fôr·böd'in)  
*n.*: feeling that something bad  
will happen.

17. **shingle-gate**: gate to the  
beach (a shingle is a pebbly  
beach).

19. **troika** (trôi'kə) *n.*: Russian  
sleigh or carriage drawn by  
three horses.



*Morning* by S. Koslov. Painted box.  
Collection of the Manufacturer of Miniatures.

- 35 Her father says: "My child,  
Tell me everything.  
If someone has harmed you,  
Tell us . . . even a hint."  
She weeps again and
- 40 Her lips remain sealed.  
The next morning, the old  
Matchmaking woman  
Unexpectedly calls and  
Sings the girl's praises;
- 45 Says to the father: "You  
Have the goods and I  
A buyer for them:  
A handsome young man.

“He bows low to no one,  
50 He lives like a lord  
With no debts nor worries;  
He’s rich and he’s generous,  
Says he will give his bride,  
On their wedding-day,  
55 A fox-fur coat, a pearl,  
Gold rings, brocaded° dresses.

56. brocaded (brō·kād'əd) *v.*  
used as *adj.*: having a raised  
design woven into the fabric.

“Yesterday, out driving,  
He saw your Natasha;  
Shall we shake hands  
60 And get her to church?”  
The woman starts to eat  
A pie, and talks in riddles,  
While the poor girl  
Does not know where to look.

65 “Agreed,” says her father;  
“Go in happiness  
To the altar, Natasha;  
It’s dull for you here;  
A swallow should not spend  
70 All its time singing,  
It’s time for you to build  
A nest for your children.”

Natasha leaned against  
The wall and tried  
75 To speak—but found herself  
Sobbing; she was shuddering  
And laughing. The matchmaker  
Poured out a cup of water,  
Gave her some to drink,  
80 Splashed some in her face.

Her parents are distressed.  
Then Natasha recovered,  
And calmly she said:  
“Your will be done. Call

85 My bridegroom to the feast,  
Bake loaves for the whole world,  
Brew sweet mead<sup>o</sup> and call  
The law to the feast.”

87. mead (mēd) *n.*: alcoholic  
drink made of fermented  
honey and water.

“Of course, Natasha, angel!  
90 You know we’d give our lives  
To make you happy!”  
They bake and they brew;  
The worthy guests come,  
The bride is led to the feast,  
95 Her maids sing and weep;  
Then horses and a sledge

With the groom—and all sit.  
The glasses ring and clatter,  
The toasting-cup is passed

100 From hand to hand in tumult,<sup>o</sup>  
The guests are drunk.

100. tumult (tūmʹult) *n.*:  
noisy commotion.

#### BRIDEGROOM

“Friends, why is my fair bride  
Sad, why is she not  
105 Feasting and serving?”

The bride answers the groom:  
“I will tell you why  
As best I can. My soul  
Knows the rest, day and night  
110 I weep; an evil dream  
Oppresses me.” Her father  
Says: “My dear child, tell us  
What your dream is.”

“I dreamed,” she says, “that I  
115 Went into a forest,  
It was late and dark;  
The moon was faintly

Shining behind a cloud;  
I strayed from the path;  
120 Nothing stirred except  
The tops of the pine trees.

“And suddenly, as if  
I was awake, I saw  
A hut. I approach the hut  
125 And knock at the door  
—Silence. A prayer on my lips  
I open the door and enter.  
A candle burns. All  
Is silver and gold.”

130 BRIDEGROOM  
“What is bad about that?  
It promises wealth.”

BRIDE  
“Wait, sir, I’ve not finished.  
135 Silently I gazed  
On the silver and gold,  
The cloths, the rugs, the silks,  
From Novgorod, and I  
Was lost in wonder.

140 “Then I heard a shout  
And a clatter of hoofs . . .  
Someone has driven up  
To the porch. Quickly  
I slammed the door and hid  
145 Behind the stove. Now  
I hear many voices . . .  
Twelve young men come in,

“And with them is a girl,  
Pure and beautiful.  
150 They’ve taken no notice  
Of the ikons,<sup>o</sup> they sit

151. ikons (i'känz)  
n.: images of Christ,  
the Virgin, and saints,  
used in the Eastern  
Orthodox Church  
(also spelled *icons*).





To the table without  
Praying or taking off  
Their hats. At the head,  
155 The eldest brother,  
At his right, the youngest;  
At his left, the girl.  
Shouts, laughs, drunken clamor . . .”°

158. clamor (klam'ər) *n.*:  
loud noise.

BRIDEGROOM

160 “That betokens merriment.”

BRIDE

“Wait, sir, I’ve not finished.  
The drunken din goes on  
And grows louder still.  
165 Only the girl is sad.

“She sits silent, neither  
Eating nor drinking;  
But sheds tears in plenty;  
The eldest brother

170 Takes his knife and, whistling,  
Sharpens it; seizing her by  
The hair he kills her  
And cuts off her right hand.”

“Why,” says the groom, “this  
175 Is nonsense! Believe me,  
My love, your dream is not evil.”  
She looks him in the eyes.  
“And from whose hand  
Does this ring come?”  
180 The bride said. The whole throng  
Rose in the silence.


With a clatter the ring  
Falls, and rolls along  
The floor. The groom blanches,<sup>o</sup>  
185 Trembles. Confusion . . .  
“Seize him!” the law commands.  
He’s bound, judged, put to death.  
Natasha is famous!  
Our song at an end.

184. **blanches** (blanch'iz) *v.*:  
turns white; becomes pale.

## First Thoughts

1. Why do you think Natasha doesn't immediately tell her parents what has happened? When she does tell, why do you think she describes her experience as a dream?

## Thinking Critically

2. Look back at your notes for the Quickwrite on page 62. Would your advice have worked for Natasha? Why or why not? 
3. What is the central **conflict**, or problem, in this poem?
4. Natasha invites the authorities to her wedding party. What do we later find out is the cause of this unusual action?
5. What moment would you say is the **climax** of this poem? Describe what you visualize happening at that moment.

## Extending Interpretations

6. Some parts of Natasha's story are not explained in the poem. We don't know why she went into the forest at night or how she escaped from the hut without being seen. How would you explain these parts of the plot?
7. Could the main events of this poem happen today? Why or why not?

## Reading Check

- a. Natasha goes into the woods. What is the **effect** of her action?
- b. Natasha runs home terrified when the young man goes by in his carriage. What do we learn later is the **cause** of her terror?
- c. What are the "goods" that the match-maker speaks of? Who is the "buyer"?
- d. Natasha tells the story of her dream at her wedding banquet. What is the **effect** of this story on her guests?
- e. Who killed the girl in the hut?

