
A MARXIST READING OF *NIKOLAI OSTROVSKY'S HOW THE STEEL WAS TEMPERED*

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ABSTRACT: *The paper proves that How the Steel Was Tempered depicts the theory of Marxism. During the end of the 19th century and the start of the 20th century, capitalism spread in various countries in Europe. As a result, the struggle of the common masses became more organized and conscious. As the conflicts between the upper and lower class became more profound, the philosophical thought of Marxism spread rapidly. The paper makes an analysis of Marxism in How the Steel Was Tempered. The paper discusses all the Marxist ideologies found in the novel, including: the inequality between classes, anti-Capitalism, class conflict, historical materialism, and alienation. So, this paper will add a piece of new information in the existing literature.*

KEYWORDS: Capitalism, Marxism, Class, Materialism, Alienation.

INTRODUCTION

How the Steel Was Tempered was written by Nikolai Ostrovsky, and it is a fictionalized autobiography that draws inspiration from Ostrovsky's life. The autobiographical novel enjoys excellent significance in the history of Soviet literature. The novel is divided into two sections, where the first is about the protagonist's childhood and adolescence while the latter part is about his mature years and illness. The novel is a famous example of Socialist Realism as it is infused with the ideology of socialism.

Socialist realism is the basic method of Soviet literature and literary criticism. It demands from the artist a truthful and historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development. Moreover, the truthfulness and historical concreteness of the artistic representation of reality must be linked with the task of ideological transformation and education of workers in the spirit of socialism. (First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers, 1934, p. 716.)

Through *How the Steel Was Tempered*, one learns about the spirit behind socialist Russia and how it was shaped. Ostrovsky spent much of his time as a mechanic in the railway depot to escape the atmosphere of corruption. It was here that he learned of the workers' struggle, human rights and about Lenin and his ideas (Prokofieva, 2002, p.5). The literature of socialist realism depicts people from a different perspective and portrays them to be strongly organized and very creative. Thus, the artistic treatment of socialist construction in the literature of socialist realism is the central theme. What makes the literature even more revolutionary is the revolutionizing force of the key moments in the history (Mato, 2000). There is a strong sense of proletarian internationalism and socialist humanism in those characters and scenes (Prokofieva, 2002, p.18).

Ostrovsky was born in the Viliya village in 1904. His father, a seasonal worker, was barely

able to support his family with his meager earnings (Prokofieva, 2002, p.5). There were dire poverty and exploitation everywhere for the agricultural laborers and poor workers. Ostrovsky, even as a child could sense the social injustice and human degradation that stemmed from class segregations. He worked as a shepherd and hen in a railway kitchen. When he worked with his brother, a mechanic, he learned about the workers' struggle for human rights (Prokofieva, 2002, p.5). "It was there that he learned of the workers' struggle for human rights, and heard the Bolsheviks speak of Lenin and Lenin's ideas" (Prokofieva, 2002, p.5). Pavel Korchagin is the main character of the novel. He gets expelled from the school because of an unworthy act, and that gives him a chance to mingle with the common people and get the real education of life. Still, Pavel is too young to understand the meaning and fears of real class struggle and how the movement needs strong and brave men. Pavel falls in love with Tonia Toumanova, who is from a wealthy influential family. Their intimate relationship fades away as they grow and become aware of their social status and class differences (Prokofieva, 2002, p.11).

After the Civil War, Pavel works in the Cheka and later goes to Kiev to work under Comrade Segal. Pavel helps in the construction of a narrow-gauge railway in winter, and this is a hard work. There is no rest, and the work goes on in four shifts. However, the work keeps getting delayed because of gang raids and a shortage of food and later ends into a complete breakdown. Pavel becomes very ill, but after a break and rest, he returns to the workshop for Komsomol members. The class struggle continues throughout Ukraine, and revolution enemies try to suppress the workshops of Komsomol. According to Pavel, the most precious thing in life is life itself, and it should be lived without pain or fear. He believes firmly in the liberation of humanity and freedom to live. As a propagandist of his party, Pavel values life, especially after witnessing many deaths. At the end of the novel, Pavel becomes sick and sent to the sanatorium where he is diagnosed with a severe illness that leads to complete immobility (Prokofieva, 2002, p.7).

How the Steel Was Tempered can be read from a Marxist point of view. "Marxism is a body of ideas that look at human history as a class struggle and analyzes the capitalist system based on its dynamics and contradictions" (Birchall, 2003, p.92). According to Marxism, the working class struggles to overthrow capitalism to establish its identity within a classless society. *How the Steel Was Tempered* is studied as a key example of Marxism. There's an ideological passion about the novel that makes it disturbing and people avoid talking about it as it is riddled with the communist principles.

One of the main pillars of Marxism that is portrayed in *How the Steel Was Tempered* is inequality. The question of equality has always been an important one for Marx. The questions of equality are sure to arise when people come in contact with each other in their social lives. Throughout the history of mankind, every country and community has faced the issue of social conflicts and class divisions. According to Marxism, capitalism originates situations that cultivate inequality between the capitalists and the working class. The Revolution of 1917 and the civil war in Ukraine exposed the younger generation to the vortex of the class struggle as stated by Prokofieva (2002, p.6). In the conversation between Pavel and Klimka, Pavel claims about the hard life they lead working like horses for the masters. No matter how hard they work, it is hard to please the masters as they always end up finding faults: "We work like horses and instead of thanks we get blows – anyone can beat you, and there's nobody to stick up for you. The masters hire us to serve them, but anyone who's strong enough has the right to beat us" (Prokofieva, 2002, p.32). As more and more people took to arms, Ukraine came under the

grip of a merciless class struggle. The days of peace and tranquility were gone forever (Prokofieva, 2002, p.87). The workers felt powerless in the face of Ukrainian bourgeois chauvinism (Prokofieva, 2002, p.88). When discussing the relationship between Pavel and his friend Tonya, the author highlights their class difference. When Tonya arrives wearing fine clothes for a Komsomol gathering, Pavel is embarrassed and Pankratov comments: "She doesn't belong here by the looks of her. Too bourgeois-looking. How did she get in?" (Prokofieva, 2002, p.216).

In *How the Steel Was Tempered*, Different events, numerous scenes, and individual characters reflect class conflict. "Pavel had grown up in poverty and want, and he was hostile to anyone whom he considered to be wealthy." (Prokofieva, 2002, p.82). The novel shows that as Capitalism grows more and more, the proletariat also becomes concentrated on a mass scale as an organized struggle. Contradictions and conflicts grow between the exploiting and the exploited classes (Mato, 2000). In one of the scenes, Pavel is not bothered to say that "this hole is full of crooks. Look at all the money they've got! They treat us like dirt and do what they like with the girls" (Prokofieva, 2002, p.35).

Pavel's attitude towards labor and socialist property as well as his fight against slackers and self-seekers come across as a fiery organizer and an implacable fighter. Pavel is the hero within the Russian working class (Prokofieva, 2002, p.11). His anti-Capitalism attitude develops as he works hard during his childhood and experiences the injustice resulting from Capitalism. However, his heroism changes over time, and his protest against the life conditions make him aware of socialist consciousness and draw him within the class struggles. Conscious communist self-discipline develops in the name of lofty ideals in the Civil War. There is a mature socialist consciousness in his character and conduct. He breaks off his friendship with Tonya and suppresses his budding love for the Communist girl, Rita Ustinovich for his fight towards his goals (Prokofieva, 2002, p.11). In Artem's words: "You'll see, we'll feed ourselves up like capitalists, ha ha! (Prokofieva, 2002, p. 75).

Another pillar of Marxism that is demonstrated in the novel is historical materialism. According to Marx, the economic system in human history carries a contradiction that leads to its end and gets replaced by another and a much more advanced economic and social life (Routledge, member of the Taylor & Francis Group, 2018). The story shows how Capitalism is led into demise and replaced by Communism. The novel starts with the hero's childhood, and he gradually molds into a strong character as he resists Capitalism and seeks to abolish it. He awakens to the need of revolting against the entire social and economic system as a result of the injustices of Capitalism. His objective is to set up a new code of social behavior based on humane morality (Prokofieva, 2002, p.10). His spontaneous protests against the conditions of life pull him into the class struggle and develop a stronger socialist consciousness within him. Accordingly, the concept of historical materialism is applied in the novel as the injustice of Capitalism leads it to its demise, and it gets replaced by a better social and economic system.

How the Steel Was Tempered is seen as a suitable area for the question of alienation. Marx believes that the worker is alienated from the commodity he produces because it is possessed and disposed of by another, the capitalist. "Under capitalism, however, this becomes an alienated activity because the worker cannot use the things he produces to keep alive or to engage in further productive activity... The worker's needs, no matter how desperate, do not give him a license to lay hands on what these same hands have produced, for all his products are the property of another" (Ollman, , 1980, p143). Pyzycki, a mechanic's helper at the sugar refinery hates the bosses of the sugar refinery. He says "It is enough that our fathers and we

ourselves slaved all our lives for the Potockis. We built palaces for them, and in return His Highness the Count gave us just enough to keep us from dying of starvation.” (Ostrovsky, p.162).

CONCLUSION

Nikolay Ostrovsky, the author of *How the Steel Was Tempered*, sure deserves praise for his extraordinary skills and perseverance. The novel is an excellent example of the application of Marxism. In fact, the character of the novel and the incidents and events reveal the history of class struggle and conflicts under the capitalistic system. The working class' struggles are based on a Marxist body of ideas that tries to establish an identity within a classless society. The author still manages to create a great story despite his serious condition. The novel is about Pavel Korchagin, a young revolutionary who supports the Soviets during the Civil War and is said to reflect Ostrovsky's own life. Ostrovsky with his portrayal of a young worker constitutes a victory for the method of socialist realism. The inequality between classes, the reality of the working class, and class difference are established throughout the novel. Anti-Capitalism attitude can be seen in the different events, numerous scenes, and individual characters, especially in Pavel Korthagen's attitude. Historical materialism is shown as the conditions of class struggle develop a stronger consciousness. The idea of alienation is also evident in the novel. Finally, *How the Steel Was Tempered* endorses Marxist conceptions of historical materialism, alienation, class conflict, and proletarian revolution.

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