

Suicide in Doctor Zhivago

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Abstract

Background: The belief that all suicide is the result of mental disorder continues to be strongly held. **Aim:** To examine Doctor Zhivago by Boris Pasternak for evidence of the triggers of suicide in Russia in the first half of the 20th century. **Method:** We examined this text, noting examples of, 1) suicide, 2) attempted suicide, and 3) other mentions of suicide. **Results:** We found 3 examples of suicide, 1 example of attempted suicide, and 5 examples of other mentions of suicide. The triggers included loss of status, honour, fortune, child and lover. There was no example of suicide as the result of mental disorder. **Discussion/Conclusion:** The triggers of suicide in Russia in the first half of the 20th century are similar to those across the time and place of history and are frequently triggered by social, political and economic problems.

Introduction

Suicide has been known throughout history, in every ethnic group and geographical region. For most of the last two millennia, it has been regarded as a religious/moral issue, but for the last two centuries, it has been described as a medical issue.

In a recent issue of this journal, Shahtahmasebi (2018a&b) provided clear and persuasive arguments against the notions that all suicide is the result of mental disorder and that prevention should focus on medical solutions.

For decades we have argued similarly. We have attempted to reveal the nature of suicide by drawing attention to the way it is depicted in myth, fable and literature.

Most recently we examined “Romance of the Three Kingdoms”, a classic Chinese history/fiction of events of the second- and third-century CE, written in the 14th century CE (Pridmore & Pridmore, 2018).

Suicide is greatly influenced by culture (beliefs and customary responses to circumstances). Fiction is a useful insight into culture of time and place – the events described must be rational to the author and believable to the reader (except of course in science fiction and fantasy).

We were interested to understand suicide in early 20th century Russia. We were particularly interested to note the triggers of suicide, as this may inform with regard to universal triggers.

Method

We examined “Doctor Zhivago” (Pasternak, 2002) which was first published in Italy in 1957, and won the Nobel Prize for Literature in the following year.

We examined the text in detail, noting examples of, 1) suicide, 2) attempted suicide, and 3) other mentions of suicide. We listed the probable triggers of these events.

Results

Doctor Zhivago commences in Imperial Russia in 1902 and ends during the Second World War. The backdrop includes the Russo-Japanese War, the First World War, the October Revolution, and the Russian Civil War.

We found 3 examples of suicide, 1 example of attempted suicide, and 5 examples of other mentions of suicide.

Suicide

- a. Zhivago Senior – father of Doctor Zhivago. He was a well-known, well-liked profligate merchant/millionaire. He had abandoned his wife and son and Dr Zhivago had no memory of him.
He was travelling on a train with his lawyer (Komarovsky). He was drinking and suddenly threw himself from the train and died (p. 22).
Komarovsky was a “haughty lawyer” but villain. From information gathered during his life Doctor Zhivago states that Komarovsky “brought him to the point of bankruptcy”, got him drunk “and drove him to suicide” (p. 360).
Zhivago Senior is sympathetically depicted – he was kind and gave presents to a boy on the train (p. 24) and he may have been encouraged to drink, but there is no doubt he took the action which took his life.
- b. Pasha/Strelnikov is a major character. He becomes an Army Commissar - a fearsome commander who summarily executes his opponents. When the Red Army is victorious, because of his alliances, his life is in danger. He tells Doctor Zhivago, “They’ll arrest me to-morrow” (p. 414), and shoots himself that night (p. 415).
- c. Vassya Brykin’s mother. When his village was burned, Vassya ran away and hid in a cave. However, when his mother could not find him, she “went mad with grief and drowned herself in the river” (419).

Attempted suicide

- a. Amalia Guisar is the mother of Lara, a central character. Amalia has a longstanding affair with the lawyer Komarovsky. When Lara is a teenager she has also an intimate affair with Komarovsky. Amalia concludes this affair is occurring and tries to suicide by swallowing iodine. She receives medical attention and survives (p.63). She is able to be reassured, “I imagined ...but happily it has all turned out to be nonsense”.

Other mentions of suicide

- a. Referring to her affair with Komarovskiy, Lara states, "If Mama found out she would kill her and then kill herself." (p. 50). She is half correct – when her mother found out she attempted to kill herself.
- b. Rodya (Lara's brother) was an army cadet. He was entrusted with money to buy a present for the head of the Academy. But, he lost it gambling. He comes to her and asks her to get some replacement money from an influential friend. He said, "You realize what this means for me, what a disgrace it is, how it affects my honour as a cadet... You can't want me to make this good with my life" (p. 75).
- c. Lara and Pasha were married – Pasha found aspects of the relationship difficult, "So what was he to do? ...Divorce? Drown himself?" (p. 104).
- d. An unknown soldier – "a shell had mangled his face ...He uttered short groans ...no one could take these sounds for anything but an appeal to finish him off quickly, to put an end to his inconceivable torment" (p. 113).
- e. Sanka Pafnutkin – his friends said of him, "He wanted to shoot himself" (p. 292). At this point the story becomes fragmentary. Pafnutkin refused to take off his clothes for the White Army medical examination, assaulted an attendant, ran off and joined the Forest Brotherhood (p. 294). Why he refused to disrobe is unclear – it may simply have been modesty, but in disjointed utterances, there is talk of "a terrible infection", "incurable", which could suggest syphilis.
- f. Pamphil probably intended murder-suicide. He was in a group of people who watched a man die of enemy-inflicted injuries. He went home and killed his wife and children. "The astonishing thing was that he did not kill himself immediately afterwards." (p. 335).

The probable triggers of the suicide and attempted suicide are as follows;

	Individual	Probable trigger/s
Suicide	Zhivago Senior	Loss of fortune/status Possible shame/regret from abandoning his family Other legal problems
	Pasha/Strelnikov	Loss of position/status Facing legal consequences – possibly execution Possible shame/regret from abandoning his family
	Vassya Brykin's mother	Loss of child (adult)
Attempted suicide	Amalia Guisar	Loss of lover Loss of daughter's honour

The probable triggers/reasons for the other mentions of suicide are as follows:

- a. Lara thought her mother may suicide because of loss of honour
- b. Rodya threatened suicide as a means of blackmailing for money
- c. Pasha thought of suicide as a means of escaping an unsatisfactory relationship

- d. Unknown soldier asked to be killed as a means of avoiding physical pain
- e. Sanka Pafnutkin thought of killing himself apparently because he suffered an untreatable infectious disease
- f. Pamphil was apparently intent on murder-suicide to save his wife and children from the vicious treatment by the enemy.

Discussion

Pasternak and the Nobel Prize in Literature Committee thought his work reflected life in war-torn Russia in the first half of the 20th century. From this work we have determined that in that time and place suicide could be triggered by loss of status, honour, fortune, child and lover. The distinction between loss of status/honour and shame is unclear.

The question arises whether such events universally trigger suicide. Certainly we found evidence that such events triggered suicide in Russia 100 years previously (Pridmore and Pridmore, 2015), and in China 1000 years previously (Pridmore and Pridmore, 2018). With respect to suicide triggered by loss of a child, Aegeus, the founder of Athens drowned himself in the Aegean Sea when he (incorrectly) believed his son had died, 1200 years BCE. With respect to suicide triggered by shame, Ajax stabbed himself to death after he killed a flock of sheep while drunk, in 1184 BCE. With respect to the unknown soldier with extreme physical pain asking to be killed - Hercules (born in Greece) was extremely physically strong, but developed a painful condition from which he could get no relief. He burned himself to death in about 1200 BCE.

Myths, history and fiction abound with accounts of people suiciding to escape distressing circumstances. Doctor Zhivago contains no account of a person completing suicide as a result of mental disorder. The medical position since early in the 19th century has been that all suicide is the result of mental disorder. It is unlikely that Boris Pasternak, Dostoyevsky and all the other writers and historians who have dealt with suicide would have missed this point. It is more likely that suicide may be the consequence of mental disorder, but it may also be the result of a host of social, political and economic problems.

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