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# Classics of Russian Literature

## Course Guidebook

Professor Irwin Weil
Northwestern University

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Irwin Weil is professor of Russian and Russian Literature at Northwestern University, where he has been teaching since 1966. Previously, he taught at Harvard and Brandeis Universities. He was born and raised in Cincinnati, Ohio, in a family that speaks only Midwestern American English; his father was formerly the owner of the Cincinnati Reds baseball team. At the age of 19, as a student at the University of Chicago, the young Weil encountered the powerful talent of Dostoevsky and decided to learn how to read that literary powerhouse in his native language. When Soviet diplomats laughed at the young American's desire to enter the USSR in Stalinist days, he settled for learning, reading, and speaking Russian in the United States. Twelve years later, when Kennedy and Khrushchev agreed to open the gates slightly, he made a beeline for Moscow, only to hear from natives that he spoke Russian "too well, like a character from Tolstoy"—shades of his reading!

Dr. Weil has been going to the USSR (later Russia) for more than 45 years—lecturing at Russian universities and academies, talking up a storm with colleagues and friends by the hundreds, if not by the thousands. He knows the Russian language and its culture as well as any person born in the United States.

Dr. Weil's students come to him in groups that number more than 500 every year. He has received dozens of teaching awards from universities and national associations. He is a laureate of the International Pushkin Medal for Outstanding Service to Russian Language and Literature and the possessor of an honorary doctorate from the prestigious St. Petersburg Nevsky Institute for the Humanities. He now speaks six or seven European languages, and he reads biblical Hebrew.

Dr. Weil's written work covers the field of Russian literature and culture, with special attention to the classics of 19$^{th}$-century Russian literature and the Soviet period. He has done a great deal of work on the relations between Russian literature and music, and neither he nor his students are strangers to musical notes.

To this very day, students and colleagues continue to ask him: "So, what are *your* Russians up to now?"

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# Classics of Russian Literature

**Scope:**

Throughout the entire world, Russian culture—and most especially its 19th-century literature—has acquired an enormous reputation. Like the heydays of other cultures—the Golden Age of Athens, the biblical period of the Hebrews, the Renaissance of the Italians, the Elizabethan period in England—the century of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Pushkin, and other great Russian writers seems, to many readers, like a great moral and spiritual compass, pointing the way toward deeper and wider understanding of what some call "the Russian soul," but many others would call the soul of every human being.

How did this culture come about, within the context of a huge continental country, perched on the cusp between European and Asiatic civilizations, taking part in all of them yet not becoming completely subject to or involved in any of them? What were the origins of this culture? How did it grow and exert its influence, first on its neighbors, then on countries and civilizations far from its borders? What influences did it feel from without, and how did it adapt and shape these influences for Russian ends? What were its inner sources of strength and understanding that allowed it to touch—and sometimes to clash with—these other cultures and still come out with something distinctively Russian? What wider implications does this process have for the entire human race?

Such are the questions and musings of the mind and the heart that these lectures will attempt to arouse and entertain. No final solutions can possibly be claimed, but some amusement and, perhaps, instruction and enlightenment may well be encountered.

Some consideration will be given to the very first predecessors of the contemporary Russians and their so-called "era of Rus'," which occurred in the Eastern European territory around the ancient city of Kiev. The origin and rise of these predecessors, together with their discovery of Eastern Orthodox Christianity—their attempt to coalesce and their fatal clash with the eastern Tatar invaders, from the 9th to the 13th centuries A.D.—produced two impressive literary languages and documents well worthy of serious study.

Subsequent history contributed to a literature that reflected human life and its nature and spirit. That history included the formation of a huge empire,

starting around the city of Moscow in the 14th century and expanding under the rule of a government located in the more recent city of St. Petersburg from the early 18th century. Two cataclysmic 20th-century revolutions, which led first to the formation of the USSR in the early 1920s, then to the reestablishment of Russia as a federation in 1991, also greatly influenced the shape of literature.

After a consideration of the early formation of Russia and some of its basic documents, which provide important direction for the centuries ahead, we shall move to the 19th and 20th centuries.

We shall look at Pushkin, touted as the poetic "Sun of Russian Literature" and the "Mozart of the 19th century." Then we will examine the art of Gogol', with its remarkable combination of humor and the grotesque. The two prose giants of Russia will follow: Dostoevsky, with his dialectic between the depths of human pathology and the heights of religious inspiration, and Tolstoy, with his enormous universe of creatures, both animal and human, no two of whom are alike. Between these two giants came a very fine writer, Turgenev, who found himself, as a Russian liberal of the 1860s, caught between the radicals and the conservatives, the Westernizers and the Slavophile admirers of old Russian culture, not to mention the fierce emotions of his fellow writers. We will then turn to two immediate shapers of the 20th century: Chekhov, who has become the god of the American and British theater, and Gorky, who stood on the edge of the Russian Revolution of 1917 and survived to become the icon of Soviet ideology in literature.

From the time of the USSR, we will examine Maiakovsky, who saw the Russian Revolution as the greatest and most humane achievement of human history; Sholokhov, whose prize-winning novel saw the revolution as a tragedy that destroyed the Cossack world that he loved so well; Zoshchenko, who saw the revolution as food for parody and satire; Pasternak, one of the greatest poets of the 20th century, who also wrote a Nobel prize-winning novel; Solzhenitsyn, who first exposed the reality of the Soviet forced labor camps and continued to speak prophetically until he reached what he considered enlightened new nationalism.

We will conclude with the situation in post-Soviet Russia. In what ways can it become the worthy inheritor of such a powerful and all-embracing literary culture?

# Notes on the Course

**Russian Names:**

Traditionally, when a Russian met another Russian, each would almost always address the other by his or her first name plus the patronymic, formed by using the first name of the person's father with the suffix *-ich* or *-vich* for a man, and *-ovna* or *-evna* for a woman. Examples: Fedor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky (Theodore, the son of Michael), Anna Arkad'evna Karenina (Anna, the daughter of Arkadii).

The use of the first name and the patronymic was a way of showing respect, in the same way that we say "Mr. Jones" or "Ms. Smith." Presently in Russia, this custom is in the process of dying out, although students still almost universally address their teachers in this way. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the practice was ubiquitous.

**Transliteration:**

The Russian language uses the Cyrillic alphabet, somewhat altered after the 1917 revolution. In the sections quoted directly from literary texts, I have used the Library of Congress system of transliteration. Although it is not totally internally consistent, it is—among all those currently in use—the closest to an English speaker's sense of spelling and pronunciation. There are other systems that are more consistent internally, but they seem stiff and pretentious to the non-specialist.

In the use of proper names, I have used the spellings most familiar to English speakers.

In the bibliography, I have used the spelling employed by individual authors, many of whom deviate from the Library of Congress standard. In every case, I have tried to follow what seemed to me the dictates of common sense.

# Lecture One
# Origins of Russian Literature

**Scope:** Russian literature had its national and spiritual origins in the territory around the ancient city of Kiev, which was the sometimes grudgingly accepted center of a number of settlements and city-states, a loose confederation called "Kievan Rus'." From the 10th century A.D., its literature was deeply involved with both religion and politics. When Vladimir, prince of Kiev, in A.D. 988–989, sought a dynastic alliance by marrying the sister of the Byzantine emperor, he returned not only with a literate (and presumably beautiful) wife but also with many documents of the Eastern Orthodox Church. These documents, some of which we will examine, had been translated by a genius, St. Cyril, into the 9th-century language spoken by all Slavic peoples. This church literature bore a deeply religious feeling derived from the New Testament and rendered exquisitely by Cyril's translations. The connections between Russian literature and politics and ideology started almost 1,000 years before the advent of the Soviet Union and its Marxist ideology.

## Outline

**I.** We start some 1,000 years ago with events in the city of Kiev, where Eastern Slavs were converting to Christianity.

- **A.** After a brief look at literature between the 12th and 19th centuries, we jump forward to the 19th century—the Golden Age of Russian Literature, which began with Pushkin, the "Sun of Russian Literature," who put together the sound of the modern Russian language.
- **B.** Slightly later than Pushkin was Gogol', who knew something about the grotesqueness of life.
- **C.** Then we see how Dostoevsky delved into the human personality, taking us from hell to heaven in a few short steps. There is hardly a writer who has not been influenced by Dostoevsky.
- **D.** Tolstoy created a huge universe of memorable individuals and even animals.

**E.** Turgenev, who tried to find a way between conservative and radical thinking, was a marvelously sensitive writer.

**F.** Chekhov, a kind of god of the theater, especially to Americans, also wrote short stories that show an extraordinary sensitivity.

**G.** Gorky stands on the cusp between tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union. In his stories, we see him trying to work through a situation in which, in many ways, a dream-come-true becomes a nightmare.

**H.** Opposite to Gorky is the poet Maiakovsky, who stood for socialist values.

**I.** Nobel Prize-winner Sholokhov saw the Russian Revolution as a tragedy and painted a marvelous picture of what it was like to live through the revolution from the viewpoint of the oppressed Cossacks.

**J.** Zoshchenko saw the revolution as fodder for satire and got away with it for something like 25 years.

**K.** Pasternak reacted poetically to a collectivist society with the deep feelings and convictions of an individualist. His worship of individualism comes out in his novel *Dr. Zhivago*.

**L.** We will end the course with Solzhenitsyn, who lived through and described the horrors of the Stalinist forced labor camps; his voice became a fearless clarion of deep conviction.

**M.** In general, these writers represent a multiplicity of voices dealing with problems of world history that are both agonizing and eternal, such as God, faith, love, politics, and the human psyche, examined from every possible angle.

**II.** To see where this literary legacy began, we have to go back some 1,000 years to a city called Kiev in the Rus'—a collection of city-states. At that time, Kiev was ruled by a Prince Vladimir, who thought through many possible solutions to his political problems, finally settling on the idea of a dynastic alliance.

**A.** He proposed marriage to the sister of the Byzantine emperor, who dwelt in Constantinople (presently Istanbul). The emperor was not averse to such a proposal, and his sister eventually agreed. (We learn this information from the *Russian Primary Chronicle*, written from the 8$^{th}$–9$^{th}$ centuries to the 11$^{th}$–12$^{th}$ centuries.)

**B.** The emperor requested that Vladimir convert to Christianity. Like most people in Byzantium, the emperor and his family were Christians. He promised to give Vladimir documents that would help his conversion.

**III.** The Byzantines, whose language was Greek, had a policy of translating holy documents into the language of the native people whom they wanted to conquer and convert.

**A.** The Byzantine emperor, in 863, asked Cyril and Methodius, two talented brothers and scholars at the University of Constantinople, to translate the religious documents into the Slavic language.

**B.** Cyril and Methodius, who even had to devise an alphabet for the Slavic language (named Cyrillic after Cyril), were extraordinarily talented linguists and writers; the resulting documents were at a very high level of literary power and taste.

**IV.** In 988–989, Prince Vladimir agreed to the conversion and returned home with his new bride and the church documents given to him by the Byzantine emperor.

**A.** For many centuries after Vladimir, there continued a *dvoeverie*, the Russian term for two faiths struggling for domination in the people's imagination.

**B.** The Christian Church had a powerful tool in the documents so skillfully translated by Cyril and Methodius. All of the ancient literary power of the biblical tradition, translated at a very high level of taste and influence, was early absorbed into the subsequent Russian literary imagination.

**C.** At the same time, the old pre-Christian traditions were also very powerful influences on subsequent generations.

**D.** It was the eventual combination of these two powerful literary lineages that created what we now know as Russian literature.

**V.** Kievan times gave birth to several themes that run through Russian literature.

**A.** It is no accident that Russian literature, through many centuries, has connected with politics. Long before the Marxists insisted on such a connection, Vladimir attempted to defend Kiev through an alliance with Byzantium and Christianity, which caught the imagination of writers.

**B.** Another leitmotif of Russian literature that can be seen in the religious documents of Kievan times is the struggle for faith in the face of evil.

**C.** The pre-Christian gods of nature also play their part throughout Russian literature. As we see from Kievan times, there is an enormous Russian sensitivity to the forces and beauties of nature.

**Suggested Reading:**

Samuel Hazard Cross and Olgerd P. Sherbowitz-Wetzor, eds., *The Russian Primary Chronicle*.

Nicolas Riasanovsky, *History of Russia*.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. How would Christianity adapt itself for reception by a people accustomed to worship gods who personify forces of nature: the Sun, the Moon, the swiftness of animals?
2. Why would the forced connection of religion and politics become so natural for so many eras of Russian history?

# Lecture Two
# The Church and the Folk in Old Kiev

**Scope:** When Prince Vladimir's agents and allies tried to spread the new Christian beliefs and ceremonies among the people—mostly illiterate, but by no means stupid peasants, there arose a genuine and stubborn conflict: the old pre-Christian legends and gods versus the new ideas of salvation and grace through Jesus Christ and his powerful preaching. The result, which lasted for centuries, was called *dvoeverie* (two faiths, side by side). The new faith was literarily represented by St. Cyril's magnificent translations. The old faith persisted in oral folklore of an equally powerful expression. By the 13th century, the political situation changed substantially, with the invasion of Eastern peoples—the Tatars—under their famous leader Genghis Khan, whose military strategy and technology were very advanced for their time. One of Russia's most precious literary productions, an epic poem called "The Tale of Prince Igor," deals with Kiev's initial defeat at the hands of the Polovetsians, precursors of the Tatars.

## Outline

**I.** According to the *Russian Primary Chronicle*, the East Slavs of the 10th century were considering a new religion. They turned to Christianity after examining Judaism and Islam.

- **A.** When Prince Vladimir sent his emissaries to Constantinople, they described their impression of the cathedral of St. Sophia in these words: "We knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth."
- **B.** In St. Vladimir's conversion to Eastern Orthodoxy and the subsequent Christianization of the East Slavic world, we find the work of a saint active and effective in the everyday political world.

**II.** A very different kind of sainthood is described in the lives of Boris and Gleb, prime examples of the concept of the *kenotic* saint. The word comes from Greek, referring to the fact that Jesus humbled himself by taking on the form of man, literally by "the emptying out of his godliness."

**A.** Boris and Gleb were younger brothers of Sviatopolk, the son of Prince Vladimir. Sviatopolk got the bright idea "of adopting the advice of Cain" and plotted to kill his two younger brothers and consolidate his power as the sole prince of Kiev.

**B.** Boris soon got the news of his impending death and quoted the 38th biblical psalm: "Thy arrows have pierced me and I am ready for wounds." In short, he agreed to be killed, rather than raise his hand against his brother. Gleb reacted in a similar way: "It were better for me to die with my brother than to live on in this world."

**C.** The brothers' decision to accept death rather than fight evil with violence became an important part of the definition of Russian sainthood.

**D.** The kenotic saint, at home in heaven, became the direct opposite of the active saint at home in this world. The two contrasting ideas formed an ongoing debate often heard in Russian literature.

**III.** The East Slavic world, however, was by no means exclusively inhabited by saints. Demons and devils were deeply feared by the East Slavic people and quite dear to the hearts of their writers. A good example was Brother Isaac, who had many encounters with the demons.

**A.** After distributing all his wealth to the poor and to monasteries, Isaac took on the ascetic way of life.

**B.** The devils tricked him by pretending to be Christ and his angels. Once they had him in their demonic power, they tormented him and forced him into wild dancing; they also beat him mercilessly.

**C.** When he was rescued and restored by some fellow monks, he adopted an even greater degree of ascetic behavior. Many took him for a madman who did foolish things.

**D.** The theme of the holy fool, the fool in Christ, became a popular one in Russian literature. The ability to recognize and struggle with the demonic, a quality that appeared inside and outside human beings, became a mainstay of Russian spiritual literature.

**IV.** The folk literature of the Kievan period also produced many interesting and powerful works. Probably the most famous was the epic poem "The Lay of the Host of Prince Igor."

**A.** Composed in the late 12th or early 13th century, the poem deals with the disastrous military campaign undertaken in 1185 by Prince Igor from Putivl, one of the city-states in Kievan Rus'.

**1.** Igor was determined to defeat the Polovetsians, an Eastern tribe of people who were later assimilated into the famous Tatar conquest and destruction of Kievan Rus' in the 13th and 14th centuries.

**2.** Igor was, however, defeated and taken captive.

**B.** Perhaps the most attractive—and certainly the longest surviving figure in the poem—is Yaroslavna, the lovely wife of Prince Igor. Her lament for her husband, languishing in Polovician captivity, is one of the enduring outcries in Russian literature.

**C**. Her faithfulness and her spiritual beauty capture the reader and show the power of the natural world around her. As a strong feminine figure, she lives many centuries into the future of Russian literature.

**D.** Borodin's opera *Prince Igor* is a moving 19th-century musical adaptation of the poem.

**V.** The poem depicts a terrible time in Kievan history, when the Tatars ruled the territory ruthlessly.

**A.** Kiev went into decline, and a new city emerged on the River Moskva—Moscow.

**B.** By the 1500s, Ivan the Terrible, reigning from Moscow (r. 1533–1584), became the first tsar of Russia. Ivan defeated the Tatars and made Moscow the center of power in the territory.

**C.** He did not produce a successor, and after his death, Russia went through a time of bloody political turmoil.

**D.** In the 18th and 19th centuries, however, that history would produce the Golden Age of Russian Literature.

**Suggested Reading:**

Robert Mann, trans., *The Song of Prince Igor.*

Serge A. Zenkovsky, ed., *Medieval Russia's Epics, Chronicles, and Tales*.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. What is the relationship between the kenotic saints, who are closer to heaven than to Earth, and the active saints, who strive mightily to bring spirituality into the everyday tempestuous life on Earth?
2. In the folk imagination, what is the relationship between human beings and the natural world around them? Does oral literature see humans as powerless in relation to nature?

# Lecture Three
# Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin, 1799–1837

**Scope:** We now take a great chronological leap from the 13th century to the last year of the 18th. In the midst of the splendiferous and powerful Russian Empire, with its ancient capital of Moscow and new capital of St. Petersburg, we see the career of a new genius, descended from an African brought to Russia by Peter the Great. This bright young fellow is brought up in a family whose members adore French literature. They read it to the boy on every possible occasion, and his extraordinary memory fixes it in place. They then enroll him in a remarkable school, the Lycée (again, a French name) with the brightest young aristocrats of Russia, under highly talented teachers. Neither his mischief nor his flair for writing deserted him after he left the Lycée, and he soon found himself banished from St. Petersburg and forced to spend time in the colorful area of Bessarabia, in the southwestern part of the Russian Empire.

## Outline

**I.** St. Petersburg, founded in 1703 by Peter the Great, became, by the end of the 18th century, the center of an expanding empire and a glittering jewel of Russian and European culture. Its emperors and empresses encouraged the arts with huge capital investments, and many Russian aristocrats did the same. St. Petersburg became a city of great mansions and glorious residences.

**II.** In 1799, Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin was born into an aristocratic family.

- **A.** Pushkin's father and paternal uncle were descendants of ancient Russian aristocracy.
- **B.** Very heavily under the influence of 18th-century French language and culture, they spent long hours reading French poetry (Russian was the language of the serfs), often in the presence of young Aleksandr.
- **C.** Pushkin's nurse, a serf woman by the name of Arina Rodionovna, spoke to him in the Russian language used by non-aristocrats at

that time. She had a vast store of folk poetry that she would recite to him for long stretches.

**D.** His mother was a descendant of a Moor from Africa whom Peter the Great had brought to his court, then educated to become an officer in the Russian Army.

**E.** All of the above elements became lively parts of Pushkin's future life and poetry.

**III.** In the very early 19th century, Tsar Aleksandr I established a new school with a French name, the Lycée. The idea was to produce an educated bureaucracy to help run the country.

**A.** Among its first group of highly talented youths from Moscow came Aleksandr Pushkin.

**B.** When Pushkin arrived at the Lycée, the staff, who numbered among the finest teachers in aristocratic Russia, did not take long to realize that they had a genius on their hands—as well as one of the most mischievous and sometimes ungovernable brats in Russia.

**C.** Pushkin's schoolmates, many of them future famous leaders in Russia, found in him a loyal and staunch friend, although one with a passionate and unpredictable temper.

**D.** Neither did it take long for Pushkin's brilliant poetry to be recognized, in the Lycée and beyond. In his poetry, Pushkin combines church Slavic with the Russian language and French words.

**IV.** When this talented but rebellious and mischievous youth came out of school into the supercharged aristocratic life of early-19th-century St. Petersburg, he showed neither interest nor promise as a "top-drawer" bureaucrat.

**A.** During his absences from work, he spent a great deal of time at the gambling tables, balls, theaters, and, most especially, the ballet. He found the combination of music and movement, together with the presence of shapely women's legs, irresistible.

**B.** His rebellious temper, however, did not desert him. At a theatrical performance, he circulated the portrait of a famous French assassin of a high-ranking aristocrat. The caption, in Pushkin's handwriting, read: "A lesson to tsars!"

**C.** When this episode inevitably came to the attention of the St. Petersburg chief of police, Pushkin did not remain long in the Russian capital. He was exiled to the southwest, to the town of Kishinev in Bessarabia, near present-day Romania.

**D.** Pushkin amazed the local Kishinev residents with his eccentric costumes and his heavy, metal walking stick, which he used to keep his pistol-shooting hand strong and supple. This strengthened hand was necessary for the duels that he so often fought, often in response to insults purely imagined by the poet.

**E.** He was also eager to continue the life of admiring and enjoying women. Not only did he produce some wonderful lyrics of love, but he was actively engaged in a life that would produce a famous "Don Juan list" of women whose favors he had enjoyed.

**V.** On a trip to the Caucasus mountains, Pushkin wrote the famous poem in which he describes the waves of the Black Sea coming up to the feet of a beautiful woman. Eventually, he ended up in the port city of Odessa, which had rich links to other cultures. His activities in Odessa were important for the future of his poetry.

**Suggested Reading:**

T. J. Binyon, *Pushkin—A Biography*.

**Questions to Consider:**

**1.** When a bright and linguistically talented youngster is brought up between two powerful cultures and languages, such as French and Russian, in what ways are they likely to bend his consciousness and creativity in the future?

**2.** Why does genius, which so often depends heavily on tradition and culture, often turn to rebellion against that very tradition and culture?

# Lecture Four
# Exile, Rustic Seclusion, and Onegin

**Scope:** In Odessa, a thriving port city on the Black Sea, Pushkin managed to irritate the local governor, who soon sent him packing back to his parents' country estates in the north of Russia. During this time, he began a long work that would become Russia's greatest poem. He called it a "novel in verse": *Eugene Onegin*. Inspired partly by Byron's *Don Juan*, it dealt with many different literary themes and became an endless source of inspiration for writers and composers who came after Pushkin. Its central plot involves the title character, who is a strange combination of sensitivity, intelligence, and perversity. He recognizes the unusually high human value of the central female figure, Tatiana Larina, but rejects the love she offers when she is a young woman in the country. Later, when he sees her as a grande dame in St. Petersburg, it is his turn to experience rejection. The poem also deals with dueling and the death of the poet, perhaps a foreboding of the author's fate.

## Outline

**I.** In 1823 in Odessa, Pushkin wrote a quatrain that made devilish fun of the provincial governor, whose wife the poet had seduced.

- **A.** The poem gained immediate notoriety, and the governor, who did not deserve this treatment, became the laughingstock of Russia. He had Pushkin exiled further north to the estate of his father.
- **B.** After Pushkin discovered that his father had been co-opted to spy on him, he moved again, this time to his mother's estate, where he spent perhaps the most creative time of his life.
- **C.** By the time Pushkin reached his mother's estate, he was working on the most famous long poem in the Russian language—*Eugene Onegin*.
- **D.** In a letter, Pushkin denied that Byron's *Don Juan* had anything in common with his poem. Yet when reading the poem, one immediately senses that Pushkin is dealing ironically with the title character, as Byron had in *Don Juan*.

**II.** The title character, Eugene Onegin, has sense and intelligence enough to recognize the unusual strength and soul of the central female character, Tatiana Larina. Yet when she has the audacity to write him a magnificent letter confessing her love, he rebuffs her with self-righteous preaching.

**A.** In the last verse of the poem, however, the former country girl has now become a grande dame in St. Petersburg, the wife of a well-regarded general.

**B.** Suddenly, Onegin feels the pangs of passion and regret. It is now his turn to write an expression of love, which evokes no reply from Tatiana.

**C.** In desperation, he makes his way to her room, where she confronts him with his past self-righteous behavior. It is now her turn to preach to him, which she does with an expression of love:

*Ia vas liubliu (k chemu lukavit'?),*
*No ia drugomu otdana;*
*I budu vek emu verna.*

I love you (Why should I bend the truth?)
But I have been given to another,
and I shall be forever faithful to him.

**D.** Pushkin leaves Eugene in despair, embarrassed by the sudden arrival of Tatiana's husband.

**III.** There are three male characters in *Eugene Onegin*—Onegin, Lensky, and the city of St. Petersburg—and three female characters—Tatiana, Ol'ga (beloved of Lensky), and the muse who inspired Pushkin's poem.

**A.** The second major male character, a poet named Lensky, is a friend of Eugene, in spite of the fact that the title character "could not distinguish an iamb from a troche, no matter how hard we tried to teach him."

**B.** Lensky is a fascinating figure. His genuine feeling and passion as a poet and lover of Tatiana's sister (Ol'ga) are warmly presented in Pushkin's poetry.

**1.** One of the most moving descriptions—Lensky's love for Ol'ga—is a real demonstration of how difficult it is to render Pushkin in translation:

*On pel liubov', liubvi poslushnyi,*
*I pesn' ego byla iasna,*
*Kak mysli devy prostodushnoi,*
*Kak son mladentsa, kak luna…*

**2.** In Russian, this verse conveys a whole universe of rhythm and feeling. In English, it falls almost flat:

He sang of love, obedient to love,
and his song was clear,
like the thoughts of an open-hearted maiden,
like an infant's dream, like the moon…

**C.** But Pushkin also conveys Lensky's naivete and lack of worldly understanding. Onegin originally welcomes this innocence, and he feels loath to disturb it.

**D.** Later, at a provincial ball in the country home of Tatiana's family, Onegin decides to punish Lensky for dragging him to this banal evening, and he proceeds to dance and flirt with Ol'ga, the sister whom Lensky deeply loves.

**E.** Lensky cannot hide his mortification and anger; he bursts forth with bitter insults to his erstwhile friend.

**F.** Almost immediately, Onegin realizes, with some guilt, that he has gone too far in wounding the young poet. But it is too late: According to the rules of early-19th-century Russian society, a duel is inevitable.

**G.** Among the most beautiful passages in the poem are Lensky's lines as he awaits Onegin's arrival to fight the duel.

**H.** The duel takes place, and Onegin is horrified when he realizes that he has shot and killed his friend, the innocent young poet.

**I.** Pushkin wrote *Onegin* over many years, not finishing the poem until the latter part of the 1820s.

**IV.** While living on his mother's estate, Pushkin had affairs with women on a neighboring estate. One beautiful visitor inspired a poem. Pushkin had a marvelous realization of the greatness of femininity, but there was also another side to his poetic treatment of women, as we shall see.

**Suggested Reading and Listening:**

Aleksandr Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*, translation by James E. Falen.

———, *Eugene Onegin—A Novel in Verse*, translation and commentary by Vladimir Nabokov.

Petr I. Tchaikovsky, *Eugene Onegin*, an opera based on the poem.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. In what ways did Onegin's inability to accept and find love—in contrast with Lensky's direct passion and poetic sensitivity—reflect a division in Pushkin himself? Did the Onegin side of him kill his Lensky side?
2. In what ways did the sentimentality of Tchaikovsky's famous opera change the effect of Pushkin's highly ironic poem? Did the composer render the artistry with a power equal to that of the poet?

# Lecture Five
# December's Uprising and Two Poets Meet

**Scope:** In 1825, a group of aristocrats attempted an uprising on a St. Petersburg square. Naively, given that they had no widespread support, they thought they could overthrow the tsarist regime and replace it with a republic. Among these would-be revolutionaries were many friends of Pushkin. After an interview with the new tsar, the poet managed to extricate himself from these associations. He then discovered the work of another great poet—William Shakespeare, whose works Pushkin read in French translation. He was particularly impressed by the plays written about the guilt-ridden Henry IV, and he decided to respond in Russian. The result was his tragedy *Boris Godunov*, concerning events surrounding Russia's early-17th-century "Time of Troubles." The tragedy involves a Russian tsar who made his way to the throne by means of a murder and suffered the pangs of conscience. Naturally, the play had considerable political resonance on the Russian scene, which had just witnessed an attempted regime change. The resonance of the play was made even more powerful two generations later, when one of the greatest Russian composers, Modest Mussorgsky, converted the tragedy into one of the world's greatest operas, *Boris Godunov*.

## Outline

**I.** While Pushkin was living on his mother's estate, he received an unexpected visit from a woman he had known in St. Petersburg—Anna Pavlovna Kern, who inspired what may be the most remarkable lyric in the Russian language: "I remember that magnificent moment, when you appeared before me…like the genius of pure beauty."

**II.** Meanwhile, in St. Petersburg, under the influence of the American and French Revolutions, a few aristocratic would-be revolutionaries banded together. One of their members, Pestel, envisioned the creation of a republic in Russia.

**A.** Pushkin knew members of Pestel's group, who were fellow students at the Lycée, but failed in his attempt to join them.

**B.** In December 1825, during an interregnum between Tsar Aleksandr I and his brother, who followed him as Nikolai I, Pestel and his followers attempted a naively conceived demonstration in a public square. They were arrested by armed troops and sent to the Siberian salt mines.

**C.** When it was discovered that Pushkin had known some of the so-called "Decembrists," he was ordered to Moscow to appear before Tsar Nikolai.

**1.** According to later reports, Nikolai asked the poet what side he would have joined if he had been in St. Petersburg during the uprising.

**2.** Pushkin replied that he would have been together with his Decembrist friends.

**3.** The tsar praised him for his bravery and honesty and asked him if he would change his ideas.

**4.** He said he would try, and the tsar promised to serve as Pushkin's personal censor in the future.

**D.** Later, Pushkin wrote a poem in honor of the tsar with a veiled plea to pardon his Decembrist friends. Pushkin carried the memory of the Decembrist Uprising with him for the rest of his days, and the incident became an extremely important focal point in Russian history for the revolutionary times ahead.

**III.** While he was reading and working on his mother's estate, Pushkin encountered the works of Shakespeare in French translation. He was amazed by the force of the poetry and the drama. He composed a parody on Shakespeare's poem "The Rape of Lucrece" and translated Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*.

**A.** He then discovered Shakespeare's plays about Henry IV and was deeply impressed by the depiction of the guilt-ridden Henry after he ordered the murder of Richard II, a legitimate monarch.

**B.** Furthermore, Karamzin's famous *History of Russia* had just come out with the volume devoted to Russia's "Time of Troubles" in the late $16^{th}$ and early $17^{th}$ centuries. At that time, it was believed that Boris Godunov murdered the son of Ivan the Terrible in order to ascend to the Muscovite throne.

**C.** Inspired by Shakespeare's plays about Henry IV, Pushkin wove these events into the poetic drama *Boris Godunov*.

**IV.** Pushkin's play came at a difficult time for Nikolai I. After the Decembrist Uprising, it was not easy for the tsar to accept a play about a king's son being murdered.

**A.** The play opens with Boris making a show of reluctance before accepting the crown.

**B.** When he retreats into a monastery, his agents force a crowd, which hardly understands what it is saying, to demand that he accept the crown.

**C.** Boris gives in and makes sweeping public gestures before his coronation, inviting the public to attend a banquet where all will be welcome, no matter what their social status.

**D.** There immediately follows a scene in a monastery in which the monk Pimen talks about keeping a record of history, which will clearly record the sin of Boris in murdering Tsar Ivan's son.

**E.** Pimen is overheard by the young monk Grigorii, who decides to pass himself off as the resurrected boy.

**F.** In the meantime, Boris is tortured by his guilty conscience. He cannot sleep. This scene reminds us of a similar one in Shakespeare, when Henry IV unsuccessfully seeks sleep.

**1.** Henry then says the famous couplet:

> …then, happy low lie down,
> Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown.

**2.** Pushkin, with a very similar couplet, shows Boris beset by a hallucination of the "bloody boy" whom he murdered:

> *Na prizrak sei podui…ne okazhu ia strakha…*
> *Akh, tiazhela ty, shapka Monomakha.*
>
> Blow on the vision, then there will be no fear…
> Oh, how heavy you are, cap of Monomakh.

The cap of Monomakh was worn by the Russian monarch at his coronation.

**G.** Another scene in this play is also reminiscent of Shakespeare but in a different way.

**1.** Tsar Boris is walking out of a cathedral. A well-known character from Russian folklore, a *iurodivyi* (a "fool in

Christ"), has just been teased by a group of boys, who have made off with his *kopeck* (a small coin).

2. When the fool sees the tsar, he cries out that Boris should slit the boys' throats, as he had done to the son of Tsar Ivan.
3. The members of the tsar's suite want to arrest the fool.
4. Boris stops them and asks the fool to pray for him.
5. The fool replies that the Mother of God will not allow him to pray for a sinning tsar.
6. It would be hard to exaggerate the electric effect of this scene on a Russian audience, in Pushkin's day or in our own time.

**H.** Here we have an unexpected conjunction with Shakespeare's *Henry IV*. Just as Falstaff, one of Shakespeare's most intelligent characters, reduces the pretensions to glory of battles that claim the lives of thousands, the *iurodivyi* breaks through the royal pretensions of the guilty Boris.

1. Compare the famous reduction of honor:

   > Honor pricks me on. Yea, but how if honor prick me off when I come on?
   > How then? Can honor set to a leg? …Therefore I'll none of it. Honor is a mere scutcheon; and so ends my catechism.

2. In his own way, the *iurodivyi* matches Falstaff's rational commentary.
3. The difference between the guilty monarchs rests on the fact that Henry IV exhibits a great deal of hypocrisy; the guilty grief of Boris is real.
4. He could never say, as Henry did to Exton (the man whom Henry had ordered to murder Richard II):

   > They love not poison that do poison need,
   > Nor do I thee: though I did wish him dead,
   > I hate the murderer, love him murdered.

5. This man is not one who will experience Boris's hallucinations of bloody murder victims returning to life.

**I.** This play brings together politics, murder, and love—and all those things that make up a human's fate—in a great creation of Russian literature.

**Suggested Reading and Listening:**

Modest Mussorgsky, *Boris Godunov*, an opera based on the play.

Aleksandr Pushkin, *Boris Godunov*.

Aleksandr Pushkin, *The Poems, Prose, and Plays of Alexander Pushkin*, edited by Avrahm Yarmolinsky.

William Shakespeare, *Richard II*; *Henry IV, Part One*; *Henry IV, Part Two*; *Henry V*.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. Can a monarch or a tsar who claims to rule by divine right tolerate a theater that explores the issue of guilty monarchs who have sinned their ways to the throne? Is the monarchy stronger or weaker for tolerating such a theater?
2. Falstaff, a highly intelligent and active knight, questions, albeit comically, the very basic notions of honor and service to his monarch. The Russian fool in Christ, seen as a weak-minded madman, raises similar questions. Which of them does it more effectively?

# Lecture Six

# A Poet Contrasts Talent versus Mediocrity

**Scope:** Pushkin was well aware, perhaps even immodestly so, of his extraordinary gifts; he often contrasted and compared them with the talents of other artists. In his earlier writings, he turned to Mozart: a genius, like Pushkin, who was often able spontaneously, without extensive labors or revisions, to pour out his talent in written notes, producing marvelous melodies and rhythms. Antonio Salieri, by contrast, labored within all the rules of harmony. The result was a clash of temperaments, which led, as legend had it, to Salieri's murder of Mozart, "for the good of music" no less! Pushkin's short drama *Mozart and Salieri* echoes that legend, as does Peter Shaffer's play and film *Amadeus*. Later in his career, Pushkin looked with admiration at the great Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz. The result was a brilliant novella, *Egyptian Nights*, in which a character, in many ways like Pushkin himself, was the lesser talent, looking on as the gifted foreign improviser worked his magic on the glitterati of St. Petersburg.

## Outline

**I.** Given the extensive historical witness in *Boris Godunov*, it was hard to escape the possibility of strongly politicized reactions.

**A.** Nikolai I, who had promised to serve as Pushkin's personal censor, penned the following royal lines: "I consider it likely that Mr. Pushkin's goal would be achieved if he would change his comedy, with the necessary corrections, into a historical novel written in the style of Walter Scott."

**B.** The drama was finally published in 1831. The final line has become a proverb in the Russian language.

**1.** When the pretender takes the throne, his followers urge the crowd to shout out their support with the cry: "Long live Tsar Dmitrii Ivanovich!"

**2.** The play then ends with the statement: "*Narod bezmolvstvuet*." The verb describing the people's reaction is "to be silent," as if that were an active verb.

**C.** The taking of action by non-action and the expressing of opinion by non-expression became strong Russian characteristics. It was Pushkin who first defined them clearly.

**D.** In later Soviet times, the nature of protective silence, when violent circumstances seemed to demand speaking out, often cast a leaden weight over Russian society.

**II.** By the end of the 1820s, Pushkin's fame was securely established among the Russian reading public. At the same time, his love affairs and his reputation among the ladies were equally well known.

**A.** He was reputed to have an uncanny understanding of women and to have the ability to attract their interest and, often, their passion by the force of his wit and his talent.

**B.** At the age of 30, Pushkin realized he could not lead such a life indefinitely. The time had come for him to settle into marriage. In seeking a wife, he settled on Natalia Goncharova.

**C.** His initial joy was somewhat marred by the fact that Nikolai I appointed him to the rank of *Kammerjunker* ("Gentleman of the Bedchamber"), a rank more appropriate to men much younger than Pushkin.

**D.** It was clear that the tsar made the appointment so that the poet would bring his beautiful wife to the court balls.

**E.** Pushkin grew to resent the attention and control exerted by the tsar.

**1.** At the same time, the poet desperately needed royal help with finances and with permission to use governmental archives to get information necessary for his poetic work.

**2.** Similarly, Pushkin also deeply needed and deeply resented the fleshpots of aristocratic St. Petersburg society.

**III.** While finding himself in ever deeper financial problems and correspondingly deeper dependence on royal favor, Pushkin wrote a series of four short poetic dramas in the early 1830s. One of them, *Mozart and Salieri*, dealt directly with the problem of mediocrity and its relation to genius.

**A.** At the end of the 18th century, there was a widespread rumor that Salieri, a popular composer contemporary with Mozart, had murdered the great Austrian genius.

1. Pushkin opens his drama with Salieri's monologue: He recalls what efforts and self-sacrifice it cost him to master the art of musical creation.
2. He muses about murdering Mozart, not out of jealousy, but out of love for music. Future musicians cannot learn from Mozart, who takes his melodies directly from God. They can learn only from the craftsman, Salieri.

**B.** Later, Mozart enters in a jovial mood: He has found a blind fiddler who is "murdering" an aria from *Don Giovanni*.
1. Mozart finds this wondrously amusing.
2. Salieri is furious that his friend and colleague can take his genius so lightly.

**C.** When Mozart comes to dine with Salieri in a restaurant, the subject of Mozart's famous "Requiem" comes up.
1. Salieri tries to divert Mozart with a glass of wine that he has secretly poisoned.
2. Mozart asks: "Is it true that Beaumarchais once poisoned a person?" He then dismisses the idea with lines that have become proverbial in Russian:

> *...On zhe genii,*
> *Kak ty da ia. A genii i zlodeistvo—*
> *Dve veshchi nesovmestnye.*
>
> …He was a genius,
> Like you and me. Genius and evil-doing
> Are two things that cannot exist together.

**D.** Mozart drinks the wine and dies. Salieri is left to his final monologue: "Can he possibly be right? And I am not a genius?"
1. He desperately tries to defend himself, knowing full well the truth of Mozart's (and Pushkin's) verdict.
2. Mediocrity can never become genius, no matter what powerful means it has at its disposal.

**IV.** If Pushkin considered his genius to be at the level of Mozart, his sensitivity to the genius and creativity of others was like that of Salieri.

**A.** Back in 1826, he met the great Polish poet Mickiewicz. Although the Russian and the Pole were to have their political disagreements, Pushkin had enormous admiration for his friend's poetic talent.

**B.** Above all, Pushkin adored Mickiewicz's almost uncanny ability to improvise magnificent poetry in two languages, Polish and French. Out of this admiration, in 1835, came the story *Egyptian Nights*.

**1.** The story opens in the nicely appointed aristocratic study of the St. Petersburg aristocrat Charsky, who goes to great lengths to conceal the fact that he is a poet.

**2.** He is quite angry to have one of his creative moments rudely interrupted by the intrusion of a beggarly looking Italian visitor.

**3.** The chap is almost unceremoniously tossed out, until Charsky learns that the visitor is an Italian poetic improviser, who answers Charsky's challenge with a poem marvelously constructed on the spot.

**4.** Charsky agrees to set up a St. Petersburg evening of poetic improvisation, whose admission fees will go to the Italian poet, clearly modeled on Mickiewicz.

**5.** On the evening of the performance, the theme is finally decided; it turns out to be "Cleopatra and Her Lovers."

**6.** Charsky, who supplied the theme, says he had in mind the episode when Cleopatra offered a night of sexual love to any man at her feast who, on the following morning, would agree to give up his life to the executioner's axe. Three such men stepped forward.

**7.** In the words of Cleopatra:

> *Klianus', o mater' naslazhdenii,*
> *Tebe neslykhanno sluzhu,*
> *Na lozhe strastnoi iskushenii*
> *Prostoi naemnitsei vskhozhu…*
>
> I swear, o Mother god of all pleasures,
> It's you I serve, without demur—
> I enter as a simple hireling into
> The bed of passionate temptations…
>
> *No tol'ko utrennei porfiro*
> *Avrora vechnaia blesnet,*
> *Klianus'—pod smertnoiu sekiroi*
> *Glava schastlivtsev otpadet.*

But as soon as morning purple
Of the eternal dawn shall shine,
I swear, the heads of the happy ones shall fall
Under the executioner's axe.

**Suggested Reading:**

Aleksandr Pushkin, *The Complete Prose Fiction*, translation and commentary by Paul Debreczeny.

———, *Egyptian Nights*.

———, *Mozart and Salieri*.

———, *The Poems, Prose, and Plays of Alexander Pushkin*, edited by Avrahm Yarmolinsky.

Peter Shaffer, *Amadeus*, a play and a film.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. Is there any truth to Salieri's claim that future generations cannot learn creativity from Mozart because his inspiration came so naturally and quickly; can those future generations learn only from hard-working mediocrity, as Pushkin, perhaps somewhat unjustly, portrays in Salieri?
2. In his story *Egyptian Nights*, Pushkin implies a contrast between the repressed and conventional high society of St. Petersburg and the open and impulsive passion of his poetic version of Cleopatra's Egypt. Is there a necessary contrast between well-organized high society and the open expression of passion?

# Lecture Seven
# St. Petersburg Glorified and Death Embraced

**Scope:** Pushkin was well aware that Russian greatness and power were built on the suffering and labor of tens of millions of serfs and lower-class, urban serving people. In his narrative poem *The Bronze Horseman*, he contrasts the most famous invocation to the beauty of St. Petersburg—known as well by Russians as we know Hamlet's "To be or not to be"—with the misery of those who live and perish under the yoke of Russia's imperial establishment. Later, not long before his death, he erects his own monument, "not touchable by human hands," to be admired by countless future Russian generations. In 1837, Pushkin, who felt he had to live in Russian high society, perished from a blow brought about by the Byzantine turnings of that same society. A French officer serving in the Russian army, Georges d'Anthès, virtually stalked Pushkin's beautiful wife, Natalia. Pushkin's enraged reactions, and a nasty anonymous letter, led to a duel that ended with a bullet in the poet's abdomen and a hideously painful death—a death that Russia mourns to this very day.

## Outline

**I.** In St. Petersburg, a statue depicts Peter the Great on the back of a magnificently rearing horse. It represents the epitome of Peter's power and Russia's glory. Inspired by this statue, in 1833, three years before his death, Pushkin composed one of the most powerful short narrative poems in the Russian language—*The Bronze Horseman*.

**A.** In the introduction to the poem, Pushkin tells his version of Peter's founding of the city that will bear his name. It is a glorious, powerful tale, and it contains two quatrains known by most Russians and loved throughout the land:

*Liubliu tebia, Petra tvoren'e,*
*Liubliu tvoi strogii, stroinyi vid,*
*Nevy derzhavnoe techenie,*
*Beregovoi ee granit,…*

I love you, o creation of Peter,
I love your stern, harmonious view,
The current of the mighty Neva [River],
The granite along its riverbank…

**B.** In part 1, after the high-flown rhetorical introduction to Peter's and Russia's imperial glory, we see a very different, contrasting side of the country.
   **1.** Under a leaden November sky walks our young hero, whose name is Eugene. Pushkin lightly recalls another Eugene, with whose name his pen "was on friendly terms." But this Eugene, unlike the former one, is a poor copyist.
   **2.** He walks in a poor section of the city, bemoaning his poverty and lowly station, contrasting so starkly with that of more highly placed "lazy people."
   **3.** The weather becomes increasingly threatening, and he dreams about the one person who brings him joy in life, his girlfriend, Parasha. The rising waters of the Neva River are threatening thousands of poor people and their homes.
   **4.** At the end of a graphic description of the flood, caused in part by the low and swampy place where Peter erected his city, Eugene is seen sitting on a marble lion, his hat blasted by the wind and rain, his heels feeling the rising water.

**C.** In part 2, Eugene manages to find the spot where Parasha's house had stood.
   **1.** Clearly she is lost. Peter's city has been built on a swamp at a great price paid by the poor.
   **2.** The poor man, in desperate delirium, rushes to the statue of the man whose imperial will had created this city.
   **3.** Clenching his fist, he cries "*Uzho tebe!*" (This translates something like, "You should suffer what's coming to you!" ) Such defiance is unheard of toward the tsar.
   **4.** Eugene runs in madness; his deranged mind hears the clop, clop, clop of the bronze horse chasing the poor man wherever he flees.

**D.** The poem is a magnificently balanced contrast between the imperial glory and the miserable poverty of tsarist Russia.

1. Pushkin's sympathies are clearly divided between the two sides. Seldom has poetry captured more clearly and eloquently the great divide of Russia.
2. That Nikolai I saw this clearly is shown by his refusal to allow the poem's publication during Pushkin's lifetime.

**E.** In writing his glorification of St. Petersburg, using the famous statue of Peter, Pushkin was also engaging in polemics with his Polish poetic counterpart, Mickiewicz.
1. The Polish poet had written about the statue as a symbol of tsarist imperialism: Peter's outstretched arm was seeking to grasp its neighboring countries, such as Poland.
2. Pushkin found this interpretation false: The sculptor had intended for the arm to be extended in blessing.

**F.** The beauty of poetry united the two poets; the disharmony of politics and nationalism divided them.

**II.** In his final years, Pushkin could not help but pay the price for his earlier years of debauchery and widespread seduction of women.

**A.** Open flirtation was a constant quality of St. Petersburg's aristocratic society. Particularly ardent in pursuit of Pushkin's wife was a young French officer serving in the Russian army. His name was Georges d'Anthès.
1. In 1835, the young French officer was smitten by Natalia's beauty and soon made his passion obvious to the public. Pushkin got wind of the situation and became furious.
2. The situation was made even more complex, because d'Anthès had been legally adopted by the Dutch ambassador to St. Petersburg, Baron Jacob van Heeckeren.

**B.** Pushkin wrote a nasty letter to van Heeckeren, to which the only possible reply was to demand a duel—exactly what Pushkin wanted.

**C.** Zhukovsky, a poet and friend of Pushkin, tried hard to avert a duel that could cost Russia its greatest poet.
1. He managed to maneuver the situation so that d'Anthès proposed marriage to Ekaterina Goncharova, Natalia's sister.
2. In this way, Zhukovsky thought he had saved the situation.

**D.** In 1836, Pushkin received an anonymous letter that contained vile attempts at humor. The butt of the intended jokes was Pushkin, who was pictured as the historiographer of a Society of Cuckolds.
   **1.** It seemed to Pushkin that the letter was written on stationery available to the foreign diplomatic corps, and he assumed it was from van Heeckeren.
   **2.** The poet therefore sent a challenge to the baron, which would force a duel with d'Anthès.

**E.** At the duel, d'Anthès's shot hit Pushkin's stomach. He died after lingering painfully for several days.

**F.** The tsar was so frightened at the prospect of large demonstrations that he ordered Pushkin's body swiftly removed from St. Petersburg.
   **1.** He is buried in a monastery near the ancient city of Pskov, near his mother's estate.
   **2.** To this day, the grave is surrounded by flowers, brought fresh every day.

**G.** Russia still mourns the early loss of its greatest and most eloquent poet. The most powerful memorial is a poem Pushkin himself wrote in 1836; the epigraph is from Horace—"Exegi Monumentum." It finishes with the lines:

> To the orders of God or muse be obedient.
> Don't be afraid of insult, don't demand the laurel wreath.
> Slander and praise receive with equal indifference
> And don't argue with a fool.

**Suggested Reading:**

John Bayley, *Pushkin: A Comparative Commentary*.

Ilya Kutik, *Writing as Exorcism—The Personal Codes of Pushkin, Lermontov, and Gogol.*

Aleksandr Pushkin, *The Bronze Horseman* in *Pushkin Threefold*, poems translated by Walter Arndt.

**Questions to Consider:**

**1.** How does the grandeur of a powerful empire and aristocratic culture go together with a population kept in illiteracy and serfdom? Is it possible to make a historical judgment on such matters?

**2.** How did Pushkin's rashness and evident self-destructive tendencies fit in with his genius and creativity? Can one evaluate a genius in normal human ways?

# Lecture Eight
# Nikolai Vasil'evich Gogol', 1809–1852

**Scope:** Partly contemporary with Pushkin came the first great master of Russian prose, a man with a long, prominent nose that he immortalized in literature. Born in Ukraine, brought up with the rich folklore and devilish tales of that rich western region of the tsar's empire, Gogol' came to the capital in 1828, the year of Tolstoy's birth. After a short, spectacularly unsuccessful career as a teacher, in 1836, he wrote a play, *The Inspector General*, whose performances attracted enormous attention among Russian spectators and readers, not least of all from Tsar Nikolai I. The play's off-center sense of humor, combined with its bitingly mordant presentation of Russian corruption and civic disorder, made an impression that has lasted for 180 years with undiminished strength. Five years after writing the play, Gogol' wrote one of the greatest masterpieces of the European novella form—*The Overcoat*. This portrayal of the travails experienced by a low-ranking St. Petersburg copyist and bureaucrat, a sort of human typewriter, has captured the sympathies and imagination of countless generations.

## Outline

**I.** Concerning Pushkin, I have described work that is remarkable for its direct clarity and simplicity, worthy of a great genius. In this lecture, I turn to an artist who, despite his deep admiration for Pushkin, is in many ways the opposite.

- **A.** Gogol' loved to let his fantasy unfold in complicated ways, glorying in extensive and intricate imagery and metaphors.
- **B.** Furthermore, he was a master of grotesque humor, developing absurd situations, in which noses mysteriously disappear from people's faces and artists see visions the opposite of what they seek to create. His world is often manipulated by a devil as strong and perverse as any fiend found in medieval religious literature.

**II.** Gogol' was born in the city of Poltava, in the Ukraine. In the 19th century, it was a province of the Russian Empire, a territory with its

own language and folk traditions, dominated by Russian language and culture. Many of the author's early stories reflect this origin in a colorful way.

**A.** After some literary successes and a blatant academic failure as a lecturer—"The University and I spat at each other and parted"—in 1836, Gogol' wrote one of his masterpieces, a play called *The Inspector General*. Its first performance was an enormous and popular *coup de theatre*.

**B.** Gogol's use of Russian slang is evident even at the beginning, in an epigraph from a slang Russian proverb:

> *Na zerkalo necha peniat'*
> *Koli rozha kriva.*

An attempted translation:

> Don't gripe at the mirror
> If it's your kisser that's crooked.

**C.** The writing has about it the capacity to create wonderful jolts to the imagination, such as the judge who keeps geese in his courtroom and the teacher who broke chairs when he talked about Alexander the Great. The text opens before our eyes the wondrous and multifaceted, fantastic world of the writer's imagination.

**D.** The central character, a fairly brainless braggart and poseur, bears the name of Khlestakov, which evokes the sound of the whip.

**E.** His presence in a provincial town causes a terrible upset, because the townsfolk mistake him for an inspector general, traveling incognito from St. Petersburg to examine the administration of the provincial town, which is corrupt.

**F.** The various local officials offer him substantial amounts of money, which he gladly accepts. They think they are bribing the inspector general and covering up the crookedness of the town.

**G.** In the midst of all this confusion, Khlestakov manages to make declarations of love to both the wife and daughter of the town's mayor. The fantasies with which he woos them are marvelous exaggerations of the good life in St. Petersburg.

**H.** He mentions talking with "brother Pushkin…he's a real character, that one." He also talks about a marvelous "soup in a pot brought

straight from Paris on a ship;… its aroma beats by far anything you can find in nature." Gogol' gives full reign to his fantasy through Khlestakov's lies.

**I.** After the town's administrators send him off in the fastest available vehicle, a carriage pulled by three spirited horses (a *troika*), they find out, again by the device of reading other people's mail, that Khlestakov is a fraud who has been making fun of them.

**J.** As they start to upbraid one another, more and more loudly, a gendarme appears and announces the arrival of the real inspector general.

**K.** As Gogol' puts it, they suddenly all become "calcified" into grotesque positions.

**1.** The local postmaster is twisted into a motionless question mark. Others stand with their limbs contorted in various forms.

**2.** They stand there, as if frozen in place, for a minute and a half until the final curtain slowly falls.

**III.** There has been tremendous critical controversy over this play, perhaps indicating a rich kind of ambiguity in its text.

**A.** The conservative critics castigated Gogol' for besmirching the good name of Russia with his exposure of widespread local corruption. They did not so much deny its existence as complain that Gogol' dared to write about it openly.

**B.** The radicals and reformers sang Gogol's praises for exposing Russian social flaws, which they had been attacking for many years.

**C.** Tsar Nikolai I himself, who so constricted the presentation of Pushkin's works, was surprisingly tolerant in this case.

**1.** It is claimed that after the first performance he said: "Everyone got what was coming to him, and I got it worst of all."

**2.** He then gave royal permission for future performances. Such is the caprice of monarchs! The Russians call it "the logic of Pharaoh."

**D.** Gogol' himself denied that he had any intent to satirize tsarist Russia. He claimed the final appearance of the true inspector

general represented the Christian conscience of mankind or the biblical day of final judgment.

**E.** To deny the presence of political satire in the play is the same as denying the presence of the magnificent nose on Gogol's face. But to confine the play's meaning only to politics is a reduction of Gogol's magnificent art.

**IV.** Between 1835 and 1841, Gogol' wrote a series of brilliant novellas. Two of them have strongly captured the modern imagination.

**A.** The first one, from 1835, is entitled *The Nose*. It plunges the reader immediately into a world both comic and grotesque: A drunken Russian barber sits down to breakfast and finds a human nose in his bread.

**B.** The second chapter begins when a certain Kovaliov, who has the civil service rank of collegiate assessor, wakes up and feels his face, seeking his favorite spot, his newly pimpled nose. Instead, he feels a perfectly flat place—no wound and no nose!

**C.** In a panic, Kovaliov rushes around St. Petersburg to rectify the situation, only to meet his own nose dressed up in the gold embroidered uniform of a state councillor, a higher rank than that possessed by Kovaliov himself.

**D.** All entreaties for the nose to get back in its place are in vain. Finally, in a cathedral, the nose even refuses to talk with the face to which it rightfully belongs.

**E.** All through the story, Gogol' plays with the idea of the part—that is the nose—taking precedence over the whole—that is, Kovaliov.

**1.** The story makes the assertion that in human life, the part can be even larger—and more important—than the whole.

**2.** In the fantastic world that he creates, Gogol' wants to reverse geometry.

**F.** Then, Kovaliov awakes one morning to find his nose back on his face.

**G.** Gogol' ends with speculation about the supernatural quality of the events in the story. "But," he says, "where does one not find such events which don't fit together? …Such things, however rare, do actually happen."

**V.** The later novella, published in 1842, is the most famous masterpiece of the novella form. Its Russian title is *Shinel'*, often translated as *The Overcoat*.

**A.** A *shinel'* is a heavy outer garment with an extra layer of cloth over the shoulders, coming down to the level of the elbows.

**B.** The protagonist of the story has a name that sounds as ridiculous in Russian as it does in English: Akakii Akakievich Bashmachkin.

**C.** Akakii Akakievich, like Pushkin's Eugene in *The Bronze Horseman*, is a poor man who occupies a humble rank in the Russian civil service and serves as the butt of countless mean jokes in the government office where he works as a simple copy clerk.

**D.** He bears his fellow worker's jeers with humble submission, only once arousing their conscience by his simple but agonized words: "Leave me alone. Why are you insulting me?" At this point, the story seems to be an argument for the brotherhood of humanity.

**E.** His dilapidated overcoat is no match for the Russian winter, and Petrovich, the demonic tailor, refuses to repair the old one. When his boss gives him a bonus, he can buy a new one. But it is stolen right off his back.

**F.** He decides to seek help from local officials. Unfortunately, when he approaches an important person and tries to be heard, he hears only the blustering: "Do you realize with whom you are speaking?"

**G.** In despair, Akakii returns home and soon dies of an acute fever. There is a kind of poetic justice in the story. The important person who received Akakii with bluster soon has his own coat stolen off his back by a ghostly figure remarkably similar to Akakii Akakievich.

**Suggested Reading:**

Nikolai Gogol', *The Inspector General*.

———, *The Nose, The Overcoat, Diary of a Madman and Other Stories*, translated and with an introduction by Ronald Wilks.

Vladimir Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol*.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. Gogol' insisted that the end of his play *The Inspector General* was a representation of God's final judgment, whereas many of the spectators saw it as earthly reprisal, well deserved by petty crooks and scoundrels. Does the impact of the play change if you choose one interpretation or the other?
2. In both *The Nose* and *The Overcoat*, Gogol' uses the grotesque for various effects, from humor to horror. How does he manipulate the situation and the circumstances to make the reader laugh in some cases and shiver in others? Do the two moods ever mix together?

# Lecture Nine

# Russian Grotesque—Overcoats to Dead Souls

**Scope:** Gogol' was a tremendously restless person. Right after his success as a playwright, he set off for Western Europe, where his memories of rural Russia, filtered through his half-crazy imagination, produced an unforgettable series of grotesque and comic characters under the deceptive title of *Dead Souls*. Despite its morbid-sounding title, the novel gives a fascinating picture of a Russian *plut* ("rogue"), Chichikov. The very sibilant repetition in the name tells a great deal. In his rickety yet mighty *troika*, Chichikov slithers his way through the Russian provincial gentry, with a wondrously crooked plan, more than worthy of any world-class shyster. Later, Gogol' tried to bring his rogue to virtue, with a lack of success that was clearly predictable: Paradise was not for this inveterate denizen of hell. Gogol' did manage to irritate mightily his erstwhile friends and readers. A short time after receiving a missive from the great critic Belinsky, a letter that would have torn the hide off a hog, Gogol' died with leeches hanging from his magnificent nose.

## Outline

**I.** *The Overcoat* was very popular in Gogol's time and inspired many arguments about its interpretation.

**A.** The immediate argument claimed that Gogol' was protesting against the terrible poverty in Russia at that time. A plea for the poor seems implicit in Akakii's words to his fellow workers, who were tormenting him: "Why are you insulting me? …I am your brother."

**B.** The story also seems to be about spiritual vengeance. The devil seems to be in the character of Petrovich, the tailor, who smoothes the folds of Akakii's new coat, as if he were making something supernatural out of it.

**C.** Many modern critics have suggested that the story is nothing more than Gogol' taking pleasure in making his rich sense of fantasy come to life.

**D.** It can be argued that the story is a rich mixture of all these elements.

**II.** In 1836, Gogol' left Russia for Western Europe. He spent most of the next 11 years in Italy. During this time, he wrote the novel *Dead Souls*, which he called a "poem." It does indeed have a tremendously strong poetic element.

**A.** In Gogol's Russia, the word *soul* had two meanings: the religious notion of the human spirit and a serf owned by a Russian country landlord. To have a "hundred souls" meant to have a hundred serfs.

**B.** In the novel, *dead souls* referred to serfs who had died, but whose names were kept on the government tax rolls until the next census revision. While these names were on the rolls, the landlord had to pay taxes on them.

**C.** When a swindler named Chichikov came to a small Russian town, he undertook to buy dead souls, thus relieving their owners of their tax obligation. When he had accumulated a sufficient number, he offered them to the government as collateral for a large loan, without mention of their physical absence from this world.

**D.** In the novel, Gogol' also brought to its most powerful effectiveness his habit of creating fantastic characters, like phantoms out of a wizard's vat, who flash before the reader's eyes, then simply disappear, without playing a further role in the story. But such is their vitality that one never forgets them.

**E.** When Chichikov is bargaining to establish a price for a dead soul, the owner, Sobakevich ("son of a dog") waxes eloquent about his qualities:

> "Milushkin, the bricklayer, could set up a stove in anyone's house. Maksim Teliatnikov, the shoemaker, no sooner sticks in his awl, and you have a pair of boots that's a pair of real boots!—and not one drop of liquor in his mouth! And Yeremei Sorokopliokhin! That guy can compete with the best of them in Moscow!…"
>
> "But pardon me," interrupted Chichikov … "why bother listing all of this, they're not of any use now, these people are all dead! The dead body's only good to prop up a fence!"

**III.** In dealing with his dead souls, Gogol' also creates a series of characters who have come to be unforgettable figures in the Russian literary tradition, as well as in Russian everyday life.

**A.** Chichikov himself has all the charm of a loquacious rogue. When he speaks, it seems like honey drips right out of his mouth. When the local worthies first meet him, they react with compliments:

> The Governor: "He's a well-intentioned man."
>
> The Prosecutor: "He's a practical man."
>
> The Colonel of the Gendarmes: "He's a learned man."

Chichikov responds to the delights of the town by jumping up joyfully and kicking himself in the backside.

**B.** The first landlord to whose house he travels is Manilov, who turns out to be the opposite of virtually every other human being.

**1.** Gogol' gives one of his most detailed lists of people's interests: dogs, music, food, social position, cultivation of aristocratic company, gambling with cards, slapping around those who are socially inferior.

**2.** Manilov has none of these inclinations. The absence of these, or any, qualities in Manilov tells us something about the quality of nothingness, which Gogol' sees in him.

**C.** Many other memorable characters are introduced as Chichikov travels around the town, but, in the end, Chichikov's plans unravel entirely and he is forced to flee in that reliably swift vehicle, the Russian *troika*. In one of Russian literature's most famous passages that *troika's* trajectory is evoked:

> Ah, you steeds, you magnificent steeds! Are there windstorms caught in your manes?… You have heard the song from on high and you are straining your bronze chests, with your hoofs barely scraping the ground, you have become one stretched outline flying through the air; you dash along, inspired by God. Oh Rus', whither art thou hurtling? Give us an answer! It gives no answer…. It flies past everything on this earth, while other peoples and states, looking askance, step aside and let it pass through.

**D.** This image of the noble, elevated, medieval version of Rus' flying by other nations and states, which totally give way, became a classical representation of Russia's greatness.

**E.** What that interpretation overlooks is the fact that, inside the hurtling *troika* pulled by its magnificent steeds sits the fleeing chiseler and deceiver, Chichikov.

**IV.** Gogol' decided to compose a second part of *Dead Souls* that would present a reformed and morally improved Chichikov. As one can easily imagine, the attempt proved fruitless. The material that had been so lively in the first part turned deadly dull and lifeless in the hands of the would-be moralist.

**A.** To compensate for his literary troubles, Gogol' began to compose letters of moral advice to his friends. The burden of his arguments was to support the social status quo against all those who attacked the evils of serfdom.

**B.** He urged such activities as burning a 10-ruble note before the eyes of the serfs to show that the master did not care for money, only for the moral welfare of his serfs.

**C.** From this, you can, perhaps, see why increasing numbers of Russian readers decided that Gogol' was becoming insane or something worse: He was a cowardly turncoat from some of his best earlier writing.

**D.** The climax of this general reaction came in the form of a letter, written in Germany, where there was less censorship than in tsarist Russia. The epistle came from the critic Vissarion Belinsky, who became a powerful protagonist of Russian radicals. He wanted to overturn the tsarist system.

**E.** His letter reads in part as follows:

> Proponent of the knout, apostle of ignorance, upholder of obscurity and darkness, panegyrist of Tatar morals, what are you doing? …That you base such teaching on the Orthodox Church, that I can understand; it has always been the supporter of the knout and the handmaid of despotism. But why have you mixed Christ in here? What have you found in common between him and any church, much less the Orthodox Church?

**F.** The letter tore Gogol' to shreds, and he died soon after of malnutrition, while leeches hung off his magnificent nose.

**Suggested Reading:**

Nikolai Gogol', *Dead Souls* (a novel called a "poem"), with commentary at the end of the Norton edition.

Francis B. Randall, *Vissarion Belinsky*.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. Nabokov claims that *Dead Souls* is a description of Gogol's inner world, not a description of the actual Russian countryside. What aspects of the human imagination are covered by the grotesque landlords he constructs on his pages?
2. Does a writer who lives under a repressive political regime have a clear moral duty to use his talent as a weapon against that regime, as Belinsky insists? Was he justified in his attack on Gogol'?

# Lecture Ten

# Fedor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky, 1821–1881

**Scope:** There is probably no writer since the Renaissance who has made a deeper impression on contemporary imagination and creativity than Dostoevsky, with the possible exception of his great contemporary, Tolstoy. (Let it only be said that it was Dostoevsky who forced the creator of this lecture series, at the age of 19, to learn the magnificent Russian language.) Dostoevsky was the son of a military Russian doctor in Moscow. He grew up in the city, and he did not partake of the great rural culture of Russia. Educated as an engineer but desperately in love with French and Russian literature, he wrote an epistolary novel, *Poor Folk*, in 1844, which he submitted to a prestigious journal. Its famous editor, Nekrasov, gave it to Belinsky (shades of Gogol'), who only grudgingly agreed to read the work of some nerdy engineer. Belinsky became totally engrossed in its artistry, swallowed the work whole, went to Dostoevsky's apartment at 4:00 in the morning, embraced him, and declared the young man the future genius of Russia. Dostoevsky later wrote: "That was one of the rare moments in my life when I was truly happy." The novel itself concerned not only the difficult life of Russian poor people but also many of the themes that Dostoevsky later elaborated.

## Outline

**I.** Unlike most of the other great Russian writers of the 19th century, Dostoevsky was born in the city (Moscow) rather than in the countryside, and he had no hereditary estate or manor house on which to look back.

**A.** The young Fedor Mikhailovich received his education in an engineering institute. In 1839, while he was still in his engineering training, he received the news that his father had been murdered.

**B.** After he left the engineering institute, he translated Balzac's novel *Eugénie Grandet.* At the age of 23, he submitted the manuscript of his own novel to Nekrasov, a famous editor and poet of that time.

**C.** Nekrasov, in turn, gave the manuscript to the famous critic Vissarion Belinsky. Like Nekrasov, Belinsky was enormously popular among the liberals of the 1840s.

**D.** Belinsky was initially reluctant to read the words of an unknown engineering student, but to his amazement, he found that he could not put the manuscript down!

**E.** At 4:00 in the morning, he burst into Dostoevsky's apartment; kissed the young man three times, in Russian style; and proclaimed him a genius, the new hope of Russian literature! "Guard your gift well," he advised the astounded and impressed young man.

**F.** Belinsky's praise went to Dostoevsky's head, and his newfound arrogance lost him friends.

**II.** The novel that so impressed Belinsky was *Poor Folk*, whose epistolary form is interrupted by a short diary entry supposedly written by a young girl.

**A.** The correspondence takes place between two people who live in rooms under one roof in a poor section of St. Petersburg. The young girl is named Dobrosiolova ("kind village"). Her correspondent is an older man named Devushkin (*devushka* means "young woman").

**1.** The novel itself would probably not be remembered today if it did not bear Dostoevsky's name. There are many places where it creaks along, exposing the inexperience of a young writer.

**2.** Yet there are also many places in the book that exhibit the talent of a powerful observer and writer; glimpses of the future Dostoevsky reveal themselves.

**B.** The correspondence deals with the desperate position of the young Varvara Dobrosiolova, who can barely sustain herself materially.

**C.** Varvara meets a young man named Pokrovsky, who decides to become her tutor. Varavara believes Pokrovsky looks down on her and decides to prove she is his intellectual equal.

**1.** She steals into his room to take a book. To her horror, the books are so closely packed on the shelf that her plucking one book causes the whole library to collapse. And just at that moment, Pokrovsky enters the room to witness the falling carnage.

2. He upbraids her as a teacher would and tells her that she should be ashamed, being such a big girl, to indulge in such tricks. Her blush shows her chagrin; it also makes him look twice and realize that she is indeed a big girl, with all the attractions belonging thereto.
3. This reaction immediately communicates itself to her. She understands that he understands, and he immediately understands that she understands that he understands.
4. Back and forth the understanding goes, with the lightning speed of sensitive people. Dostoevsky had learned his lesson well from Balzac, whose novel *Père Goriot* he had read.

**D.** Pokrovsky later dies of consumption, and his drunken father is forced to follow behind his son's coffin.
1. In this case, the old man almost crazily insists on carrying with him many volumes of Pushkin, which he had given to his son on his birthday.
2. As the funeral procession moves faster, the father starts to drop the books, stops to pick them up, then runs after the coffin.
3. What starts out to be a very sad scene suddenly embarrasses us as readers: We realize that it is turning comic, a terrible thing on so clearly sad an occasion. We try to resist the laughter, but it is not easy.
4. The young Dostoevsky is delicately and masterfully treading that thin line between the grotesque and the comic.

**E.** We begin to realize, in the course of the novel, that poverty is not only a material condition.
1. It is also a metaphysical statement about people and the profound ways in which we see the human soul when the body is stripped bare of material accouterments.
2. When we get to know a person without material possessions, we get to know that person's soul.

**F.** Another theme in this novel is that of the *infernal'nitsa* ("infernal woman").
1. Varvara is a proud and powerful personality. She realizes that she cannot continue to depend on Devushkin, who has tried to help her at great cost to himself.
2. Consequently, she decides to accept the marriage proposal of Bykov, an older lecher.

3. Bykov expects a submissive young wife.
4. What he does not realize now, but will soon come to realize, is the enormous strength and willpower of Varvara. The old fellow will get much more than he bargains for.

**G.** Devushkin, of course, is devastated by her decision.
1. For Devushkin (and Dostoevsky), salvation lies in a woman.
2. We can contrast this with Gogol' and his character Akakii. What an overcoat is for Gogol', a woman is for Dostoevsky.

**H.** Another character in the story, who is worse off than Devushkin, wins a lawsuit, then dies! The relationship among life, poverty, and death at the end of poverty is something Dostoevsky will play with throughout his life.

**I.** When Devushkin's boss calls him into his office, he is so moved by Devushkin's poverty that he shakes his hand and gives him money. Thus, Devushkin turns his boss into a real human being.

**Suggested Reading:**

Fedor Dostoevsky, *Poor Folk*.

Konstantin Mochulsky, *Dostoevsky: His Life and Work*.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. Classical Russian literature usually takes place in the Russian countryside. In what way does Dostoevsky's decidedly and deliberately urban world shape his novel and its characters' approach to life?
2. How does Varvara Dobrosiolova, in *Poor Folk,* demonstrate the power of people in a weak position? How does this affect the young Dostoevsky's description of women?

# Lecture Eleven
# Near Mortality, Prison, and an Underground

**Scope:** Shortly after Dostoevsky's auspicious beginnings, Belinsky hurt the young man deeply by sharply rejecting *The Double*. The author then drifted into a mildly revolutionary circle of moderate liberals. In 1848, early in the morning, he was awakened by the tsar's police and placed under arrest. In December of 1849, he was led, together with his fellow liberals, out into the bitter St. Petersburg cold, under sentence of execution by firing squad. At the very last second, the soldiers lowered their rifles, and the condemned men heard a prearranged tsarist stay of execution. The young writer served four years in chains, working in a Siberian prison camp. This experience received much literary treatment in his subsequent work. After marrying a widow in Siberia, he returned to European Russia in 1859. The marriage was an uneasy one, and his first wife died. In 1864, with her corpse, according to Russian custom, still on the table, he wrote one of his most disturbing, moving, and penetrating works: a novella, *Notes from the Underground*. If you read it and then sleep normally for the next week, you have not read it properly. The Underground Man, a compendium of everything deep within ourselves that we try to hide but know all too well, makes an impassioned and embittered cry for human freedom but without human joy and love.

## Outline

**I.** Encouraged and emboldened by Belinsky's public praise, Dostoevsky decided to cut a high-profile figure among the high-powered literary circles of St. Petersburg. His social graces were by no means the most polished, and his inherent shyness and almost morbid sensitivity made him extremely vulnerable to the inevitable jealous barbs that came his way.

**A.** In the 1840s, Dostoevsky published *The Double*, in some ways a precursor of the kind of psychology we are interested in nowadays. The story concerns a man who believes he sees his own double. Eventually, he becomes insane. With *The Double*, we see

Dostoevsky becoming obsessed with the inner contradictions of the human spirit.

**B.** The story called forth Belinsky's apprehension and strongly negative criticism, which struck Dostoevsky painfully. Naturally, his jealous contemporaries used Belinsky's critical words in a very clever way to wound their talented rival.

**C.** To avoid their company, which he now found obnoxious, Dostoevsky gained entry into another political and social group, led by Petrashevsky, a man of moderately liberal views that bordered on the French ideas of Saint Simon and Fourier, mild precursors to socialism.

**D.** Possibly, there was another, darker side to Dostoevsky's involvement with the *Petrashevtsy* (Petrashevsky's followers): A sub-group had organized to murder one of the members of the group. Those who participated in the murder could never go to the police and denounce any of their co-assassins. This arrangement was later to become the core of a fearsome novel by Dostoevsky, *Besy*, variously translated as *The Possessed*, or *Devils*.

**E.** The affair did not end well. In April of 1849, Dostoevsky and his friends were arrested.

**1.** On December 22nd of that year, they were led out to a St. Petersburg square so that the government could carry out the sentence: execution by firing squad.

**2.** When the first rank was already tied to the stakes, the soldiers raised their rifles, and a prearranged courier galloped in with news from the tsar (our old friend, Nikolai I).

**3.** The execution would not take place; the prisoners would spend four years in Siberia, in chains, and then four years in the army.

**F.** Shortly thereafter, Dostoevsky wrote to his brother: "*Zhizn' – dar, zhizn' schast'e, kazhdaia minuta mogla byt' vekom schast'ia. Si jeaunesse savait!*" ("Life is a gift, life is happiness, every minute of life could be a century of happiness. If youth only knew!") It is hardly accidental that many of his future novels would describe the last hours of a person about to die.

**G.** On the way to Siberia, some of the prisoners were given rest and help by a widow of one of the Decembrist rebels. She gave Dostoevsky a gift he kept until the day of his death: a copy of the

New Testament. Later, he wrote her a very revealing letter, which has become famous as an expression of his religious feelings:

> I am a child of this century, of disbelief and doubt…. But God sometimes sends me minutes, when I am entirely calm. … I have set forth a symbol of faith for myself … to believe there is nothing more beautiful, profound, sympathetic, intelligent, courageous, brave, and complete than Christ.… Furthermore, if someone were to prove to me that Christ is outside the truth, then I would rather stay with Christ than with the truth.

**H.** Dostoevsky returned to central Russia after 10 years of exile, most of them spent in one of Siberia's coldest places. By 1859, he was a very different person and writer. He was also a man married to a widow with a child from a previous husband. On their wedding night, she had witnessed one of Dostoevsky's frightening attacks of epilepsy.

**I.** Back in Moscow, the marriage did not proceed too well, even leading to a partial separation. Dostoevsky's first wife died in April of 1864, and her body, according to Russian custom, lay on the table while he wrote one of his most famous, powerful, and gloomy works, *Notes from the Underground*.

**II.** The title of the work tells us a great deal. The first word—*zapiski*—implies something jotted down in a hurry, without much second thought, an unedited outpouring of feeling. The words that follow—*iz podpol'ia*—literally mean "from the cellar."

**A.** The fictional writer of these jottings lives in the cellar. He is musing about the nature of freedom, in a philosophical sense: To what extent are we really free from all outside conditions and influences when we wish to exercise our own will?

**B.** Typically for Dostoevsky, the author himself contradicts his own protagonist in the introduction, when he states: "Such people…not only can but must exist in our society, taking into account the circumstances under which our society has developed."

**1.** In this note, signed with his own name, the author states that the Underground Man has been produced by those very outside circumstances whose power he heroically and passionately tries to deny, all in the name of freedom of the human will!

**2.** Clearly, Dostoevsky exults in the paradox.

**III.** The novel begins with the most unlikely phrases to attract and hold the attention of the reader, including inversions of normal order: "*Ia chelovek bol'noi...ia zloi chelovek. Neprivlekatel'nyi ia chelovek*." (*very* literally: "I man sick, I spiteful man. Unattractive I man.")

**A.** With a satanic kind of glee, the Underground Man flaunts his nasty unattractiveness in our faces. He offers an excuse, claiming that his liver hurts, then immediately denies it, claiming the ineffectiveness of any medical cure, which to be sure, he is taking.

**B.** In 11 closely reasoned, short chapters, stated in the most febrile way possible, the Underground Man takes us through his refutation of the 19th-century notion of progress, human improvement, and the possibility of a decent human society.

**IV.** An interlocutor springs up in the text, out of the Underground Man's feverish imagination.

**A.** The interlocutor appeals to the rational notion of self-interest. Nobody, he claims, acts against his own self-interest, and a decent society can educate humans to a proper undertstanding of true self-interest, which will correspond to the interests of a genuinely good society.

**B.** One can hear the echoes of 19th-century utilitarianism and later socialism in the Underground Man's polemics.

**V.** The Underground Man is ready to act against his own self-interest. Under no circumstances will he allow himself to be a piano key under God's hands or under socialist hands.

**A.** His interlocutor exclaims that the chap would even find pleasure in the pain of a toothache!

**B.** The reply is that there is indeed pleasure in the groans of a man with a toothache, which can bother the peace of his neighbor.

**C.** Dostoevsky's hero is ready to throw himself out the "window of paradise," rather than be forced to admit that two times two always equals four.

**D.** He lives in pain and total isolation in a "cellar" of his own making. He makes an argument for freedom, but we also see that perverse devil who lives inside every one of us: We can act out of spite to show we are not controlled by anything outside ourselves.

**VI.** The narration now turns from dramatized argumentation to a series of reminiscences that give us some idea of why the Underground Man's self-constructed world is so bleak.

**A.** This section starts with an epigraph taken from a popular poem by Nekrasov, the editor who had accepted and published Dostoevsky's first novel.

**1.** In the poem, Nekrasov makes a rather self-satisfied statement about his rescue of a fallen woman: From a life of vice and despair, she comes into the poet's house as a respectable woman.

**2.** It is clear that the estranged and analytical eye of Dostoevsky's narrator looks upon this outcome with derision.

**B.** The memories start out with a great deal of self-contempt. The Underground Man wants to establish his existence in the presence of an officer, who—always looking neither to the right nor to the left—walks right past our hero and forces him to give way.

**C.** The Underground Man decides to hold his ground. After mortgaging his salary for months ahead, he gets a cheap fur, which will make him look respectable enough to bump into the officer rather than to have to give way to him.

**1.** The officer pays him no attention and walks right on. Our protagonist's existence will not be established by clothes or by relations with officers.

**2.** He even imagines the officer 14 years later: "*Chto on teper'*, *moi golubchik*? *Kogo davit?*" ("What's he doing now, my dear little pigeon dove? Whom is he crowding out of the way?")

**3.** The use of the marvelous Russian *golubchik* ("pigeon dove," or "darling") shows the Underground Man's ambivalence: He wants the relationship, yet he can't stand it.

**D.** This discomfort is intensified powerfully when the narrator meets old schoolmates and invites himself to their party. They don't want him there.

**1.** The night turns into a perfect reproduction of the nightmare of a cocktail party where no one really wants to talk to you.

**2.** The narrator becomes drunk on champagne, dreadfully insults the honoree, and ends up pacing the room silently for two hours, while the others engage in conversation.

**E.** When they rush off to a house of ill repute, he insists on chasing them.
   **1.** There, he meets a strong young woman—a prostitute. He begins to preach at her.
   **2.** Eventually, he makes her miserable; then, in a moment of remorse, he gives her his address and invites her to come for a visit.

**F.** When she shows up, right after he has a terrible, soul-shaking row with his servant, she sees he is much poorer than the impression he had given.
   **1.** He begins to pour out his grief to her. For the first time, the Underground Man is trying to make human contact.
   **2.** But he shoves a 5-ruble note into her hand, which she rejects before rushing out.

**G.** The slamming of the door as she leaves indicates the hell into which he has put himself. As Dostoevsky will say repeatedly, hell is the place where a person is unable to love.

**H.** The Underground Man has shown that he cannot experience the freedom he wants together with the feeling of love. For him, the two states are mutually exclusive.

**VII.** Dostoevsky will try to deal with the problem of the coexistence of freedom and love in his future works.

**Suggested Reading:**

Fedor Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground*, *Three Short Novels of Dostoevsky*, translated by Constance Garnett and revised by Avrahm Yarmolinsky.

Robert L. Jackson, *The Art of Dostoevsky*.

Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*; a dissenting, critical view of Dostoevsky.

**Questions to Consider:**

**1.** Why is the Underground Man so disturbed by the idea of people acting rationally in their own interests? Is there really pleasure to be gained from a toothache?

**2.** What in the character of the Underground Man prevents him from responding to the love offered by Liza, the young woman who accepts the invitation to come to his apartment? What prevents him from seeing the possibility of freedom and human love existing side by side?

# Lecture Twelve
# Second Wife and a Great Crime Novel Begins

**Scope:** In the 1860s, Dostoevsky got himself out of a dangerous snare with his publisher, thanks to the help of a young woman stenographer, Anna Grigor'evna Snitkina, who took not only his dictation but also his proposal for marriage. Subsequently, she played no small role in the production of the world's greatest novels. Dostoevsky was long fascinated by human foibles, especially the very Russian habit of alcoholism. He decided to deal with this problem in a novel called *P'ianen'kie* (*The Dear Little Drunkards*), but his main character, a certain Marmeladov (notice the jelly in the man's name) met a young, troubled student named Raskol'nikov (literally, "from among the schismatics"). The resulting murderous and inflamingly introspective journey became the world-famous *Crime and Punishment*. In the beginning, we see a St. Petersburg quite far from Pushkin's glorious creation of Peter. We see a crowded tenement, whose banisters are covered with sticky eggshells, and canals that stink when their levels go down in an unusually hot summer.

## Outline

**I.** For a variety of personal and business reasons, Dostoevsky found himself in a bad financial and emotional situation in the 1860s. To pay his debts, he signed an agreement with a publisher.

**A.** The conditions of the agreement stipulated that in two years, the writer would submit the manuscript of a new novel of a specified length. In return, the publisher would pay off Dostoevsky's debts and give him enough money to live on for the two years.

**B.** If he failed to fulfill this agreement, the publisher would get the rights to everything Dostoevsky had written up to that time, plus everything that he wrote in the future. Almost two years passed, and Dostoevsky had not even started on the new novel. Finally, a month before his deadline, Dostoevsky found a way to get himself out of the mess.

**II.** At that time, a new institution established itself in Russia: the School of Stenography. Friends convinced a skeptical Dostoevsky to try dictation.

**A.** The best student of the institute, a young woman by the name of Anna Grigor'evna Snitkina, came to his apartment.

**B.** After finding himself tongue-tied for over a day, Dostoevsky located his voice and, in slightly less than a month, dictated the text of the novella *The Gambler*, on a theme not entirely unknown to Dostoevsky, to put it mildly.

**C.** The finished manuscript was delivered in the nick of time. The publisher managed to be out of town on that day, but the author took the manuscript to a police notary, and thus he had legal proof of delivery within the agreed deadline.

**D.** Shortly thereafter, Dostoevsky and his friends followed Russian custom and arranged a banquet for all concerned, including the young stenographer.

**E.** When she arrived, the writer requested her help with another problem: He was constructing a story where a somewhat older man had fallen in love with a young woman. His was a difficult character— temperamental, moody, not an easy person to be with—he had even spent time in a Siberian prison. But he sincerely loved the young woman; would his proposal of marriage sound convincing in the story?

**F.** Anna Grigor'evna replied, "I accept your proposal." Their marriage lasted for almost 15 years, until his death in 1881.

**1.** She had the stamina and courage to put up with his very difficult, sometimes almost violent, character.

**2.** She played an important role in making it possible for him to write several masterpieces, most especially including *The Brothers Karamazov*, which he gallantly, and rightfully, dedicated to her.

**G.** Anna survived him up to the time of the Bolshevik Revolution, when she died from overeating after a period of starvation, a sad end for a woman who had played a vital role in the survival of Dostoevsky's papers and the publication of his works.

**III.** In 1865, Dostoevsky was determined to write a novel on the theme of alcoholism, to be called *P'ianen'kie* (*The Dear Little Drunkards*, later entitled *Crime and Punishment*).

**A.** In an early scene, the young student Raskol'nikov has managed to drag himself out of his tiny room in a poor part of the city. He is obsessed with the idea of killing someone as a form of philanthropy. He believes he is a kind of Napoleon—someone who is not subject to society's rules.

**B.** In a bar, he meets Marmeladov, who pours out a terrible tale of what has happened to his family. He has drunk away all their money and forced his own daughter (Sonya) into prostitution.

**C.** When Raskol'nikov accompanies the drunken Marmeladov to his apartment, we see the desperate situation of Katerina Ivanovna, his consumptive wife, and their children living in terrible poverty.

**D.** Raskol'nikov beats a hasty retreat. But before he leaves, he instinctively empties his own pockets to leave his last kopeks for the use of the family.

**E.** This same man, who is making himself ready to commit an awful murder, is also capable of sacrificing his last kopeks to support a poor family whose members he barely knows.

**F.** Clearly, the human being is a very divided creature, capable of extreme actions, both in a morally positive and negative sense.

**G.** Equally clearly, this family, particularly the daughter, Sonya, is a force that draws out the humanly decent and moral side of Raskol'nikov.

**IV.** When he gets back to his room, Raskol'nikov is confronted not only with a police summons, for nonpayment of rent, but also with a letter. It turns out to be from his mother, Pul'kheriia, whose name comes from the Latin word for beautiful.

**A.** The letter tells Raskol'nikov about the suffering of his sister, Dunya, who turns out to be the strongest person in the novel. It seems that she obtained a household service position in the family of a certain Svidrigailov.

**1.** No sooner did she appear in his household than Svidrigailov began to press her for a sexual relationship, which she indignantly refused.

2. Through a misunderstanding, Mrs. Svidrigailov thought the young woman was a seducer and sent her away in public disgrace.

**B.** Despite her suffering from town gossip, Dunya is soon cleared of suspicion after Svidrigailov's confession of the facts.

**C.** She then becomes a kind of local heroine, and she receives a marriage proposal from a Mr. Luzhin ("mud puddle," a good description of his character). From arrangements he offers, it is clear that he wants a poor young woman so that he can tyrannize her in his own household.

**D.** After some agonized introspection, Dunya accepts his proposal, on the assumption that he will help her family.

**E.** In her letter to her son, the mother rubs in this assumption of Dunya's with seemingly gentle maternal urgings: Love your sister; she wants to do so much for you!

**F.** Raskol'nikov is furious. He is furious at Svidrigailov for attempting to corrupt Dunya. In his imagination, Svidrigailov becomes the epitome of evil. Every time he sees a corrupt person, he calls him a "Svidrigailov."

**V.** Raskol'nikov is willing to sacrifice his own soul to kill and rob an old pawnbroker woman and to use the proceeds to help himself and others in need. He plots the murder carefully.

**VI.** Raskol'nikov staggers under the load of his obsessions and difficulties, and he tries to find surcease in one of St. Petersburg's fresh and green parks.

**A.** After drinking a glass of vodka, he suddenly falls asleep under some bushes. The result is a terrible nightmare, which has resounded in literary history ever since. Dostoevsky was at his most terrifyingly talented when he portrayed dreams.

**B.** In his dream, Raskol'nikov is a child again, going with his father to the cemetery where his brother is buried. In passing a tavern, they see an upsetting scene: A drunken peasant is inviting a drunken crowd into a cart hitched to a broken-down old horse that could not possibly pull such a load.

**C.** When the horse strains to move, the poor animal is whipped from all sides and, eventually, across the eyes. As the hysteria of the crowd rises, the peasant then raises an iron bar and swings it with

full force down on the horse's head. Dostoevsky does not spare the sadistic details.

**D.** The young boy finally manages to struggle loose and tries to embrace the horse, but his father restrains him. Helplessly, the boy sobs, "Why?"

**E.** Raskol'nikov wakes up at this point, believing that he cannot commit the murder. On his way home, he sees the pawnbroker's half-sister, who lives with the pawnbroker. He hears her say that she will be away at a certain time. Raskol'nikov knows the coast will be clear. By sheer chance, the murder is on again!

**VII.** It is a rare reader of Dostoevsky who forgets the scene of the murder. It is so realistic that André Gide once asked if Dostoevsky had ever killed anyone. Raskol'nikov appears to have committed the perfect crime. But what happens to the conscience of such a man? This we shall see in the next lecture.

**Suggested Reading:**
Fedor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, Norton Critical Edition of the novel, with commentary by critics espousing different points of view.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. How does the letter from Pul'kheria, Raskol'nikov's mother, play into both the positive and negative sides of his character?
2. How does Dostoevsky construct and use the famous dream about beating the horse to show the complexity of Raskol'nikov's many different impulses?

# Lecture Thirteen
# Inside the Troubled Mind of a Criminal

**Scope:** The tortured mind and heart of the intelligent young criminal leads us through the gallery of psychological doubles, mates to various sides of Raskol'nikov's fractured personality: Svidrigailov, the apogee of evil and malice, who yet turns out to have a better side; Sonya, a young girl forced into prostitution to support her family, uses the great Russian version of the New Testament to push Raskol'nikov in a very different direction, toward salvation; Porfiry Petrovich, the investigating prosecutor looms like an almost supernatural doom over the protagonist, yet offers a kind of legal salvation in the end. All of them, together with other penetrating psychological portraits, make *Crime and Punishment* a conflagration of passions and arguments that hypnotize the reader.

## Outline

**I.** As Raskol'nikov evades those who arrive on the murder scene, our hearts pound with the fears and passions of the murderer. But our apprehensions are nothing compared with the building anxiety within the murderer himself.

- **A.** Raskol'nikov lies in a tortured, half-delirious state in his cramped room. His friends, including Razumikhin ("the rational one"), vainly try to bring the young man out of what seems like an irrational state close to insanity.
- **B.** Dostoevsky is skilled at involving his readers in the madness of this scene, as the horror of what he has done repeats itself over and over in Raskol'nikov's mind.
- **C.** We soon learn that the young man is not totally irrational when Luzhin, the obnoxious man who is engaged to Dunya, comes to visit him. Not only is there a complete absence of politeness, but Raskol'nikov threatens to throw Luzhin down the stairs. Raskol'nikov has now made an enemy of Luzhin.
- **D.** Meanwhile, Raskol'nikov's mother and sister arrive. Again, this scene illustrates Dostoevsky's mastery of suspense. Razumikhin tries to assuage their worries. He becomes attracted to Dunya,

who, in turn, becomes attracted to Razumikhin, because his decency shows through his clumsy attempts to assuage her concerns and to hide his attraction to her.

**II.** In a marvelous scene of psychological torture, Raskol'nikov pays a visit to Porfiry Petrovich, the investigating prosecutor of the murder case.

**A.** The experienced older man is suspicious of Raskol'nikov. He mentions one of the articles that Raskol'nikov has written, in which he argues that certain rare and extraordinary individuals have the moral right to commit crimes, even murders, if they are done to bring benefit to humankind; these people are the Napoleons of the world of ideas.

**B.** Petrovich then asks Raskol'nikov how one would recognize such a person—and, by the way, did he consider himself one of them?

**C.** The suggestion is planted as an extraordinary explanation for an extraordinary murder.

**D.** It resounds with terrible resonance after the 20th century, when dictators ordered the murder of millions, simply because they were supposedly of a lesser order of humanity.

**III.** Dostoevsky is brilliant at increasing tension at the very moment it seems it could not get worse. Raskol'nikov gets into more and more hot water. Eventually, near the end of part 3, with all of these passions and fears boiling within him, Raskol'nikov returns to his small room.

**A.** Suddenly, he is back in the old woman's apartment; she is cackling away, he lifts the axe with frenzy and strikes her head again and again, only to hear her laughing so hard that she is shaking. He tries to scream and half awakes. Again, Dostoevsky has trapped us into a nightmare, barely distinguished from reality. But this time it is different.

**B.** He is aware of a presence in the room. A man is sitting on a chair, staring at him. The intruder is Arkady Ivanovich Svidrigailov, who tells Raskol'nikov that they have something in common.

**1.** In the face of Raskol'nikov's denial, Svidrigailov talks about seeing a ghost.

**2.** Remembering his own nightmare, Raskol'nikov tries to suggest that Svidrigailov is mentally ill.

3. The reply: Oh yes, but the fact that only ill people see ghosts is no proof that ghosts do not exist. It proves that you must be sick to see them.
4. Raskol'nikov begins to see why Svidrigailov states that they have something in common.

**C.** The conversation turns to the subject of eternity, which Svidrigailov describes as a dusty public bathhouse with spider webs in the corners.
1. The bleakness of his vision reinforces Raskol'nikov's own feelings of guilt and estrangement—from his family, friends, and the world of reality around him.
2. The bond between them becomes even stronger, emphasizing how tightly they are now connected.

**IV.** Raskol'nikov remembers a promise he made to visit Sonya, the daughter of Marmeladov, who had died after an accident, leaving his family totally dependent on her.

**A.** In their encounter, we see Raskol'nikov challenged by the better side of his own nature, which we have previously witnessed in his impulsive acts of generosity toward the Marmeladov family.

**B.** He starts by almost torturing Sonya with the knowledge of her family's difficulties. The mother is on the verge of madness and will probably die soon.

**C.** Sonya's response is to fall back on her religion; she repeats that God will not allow such injustice to happen. Raskol'nikov then, with malicious enjoyment, repeats the opinion common among the Russian radicals of his day: Perhaps God does not exist!

**D.** Raskol'nikov suddenly falls to the ground and kisses her feet. Here, we see both sides of Raskol'nikov: his malice and his ability to appreciate decency and faith.

**E.** He asks Sonya to read from the New Testament about the resurrection of Lazarus. She reads the part where Jesus tells the people to remove the stone from the grave.
1. Earlier, Dostoevsky had made quite a point about Raskol'nikov hiding the valuables and money taken from the old woman's apartment under a stone.

2. Just as the stone on the grave of Lazarus must be removed for his resurrection, so must the stone be taken away from the valuables stolen from the murdered old woman.
3. Raskol'nikov must work his way toward salvation through the expiation and confession of his crime.

**F.** Dostoevsky compounds the strong feeling of the scene by letting us know that Svidrigailov, in the next room, has overheard the whole conversation and now believes Raskol'nikov to be the pawnbroker's murderer.

**V.** News comes that Katerina Ivanovna is dying.

**A.** Raskol'nikov is forced to deal with Svidrigailov once more, when Svidrigailov exhibits generosity to Katerina's orphans, then lets Raskol'nikov know that his conversations with Sonya have been overheard.

**B.** Svidrigailov uses his knowledge of Raskol'nikov's crime to tempt Dunya to meet him—for the good of her brother.
1. Svidrigailov convinces Dunya to come to a room where they can be alone, whereupon he threatens her with rape.
2. She pulls out a pistol that he had given her at the time she was on his estate.
3. Undeterred, he walks toward her, and she shoots twice, barely missing him. He continues to walk toward her—this time, she cannot possibly miss, yet she drops the revolver.
4. Unlike her brother, she cannot kill another human being, even an evil one.

**C.** Once again, Dunya proves herself the strongest person in the novel.
1. In the contest of pride with her brother, she is the winner.
2. Svidrigailov understands, and he unlocks the door to the room, letting her escape unharmed.

**D.** This scene is the end for Svidrigailov. He commits suicide.

**E.** It is only after Raskol'nikov hears of the suicide, while he is at the police station, where he has gone to confess his crime, that he actually has the courage to make the confession.

**F.** Clearly, Svidrigailov must be gone before Raskol'nikov can take the first step toward redemption.

**VI.** The novel finishes with an epilogue, claiming to portray the redemption of Raskol'nikov in a Siberian prison.

**A.** Many readers and critics have rejected the epilogue, insisting that Dostoevsky lost his literary power when he strove too easily to untie the knot of human problems.

**B.** Yet it was clear that his imagination was beginning to work in another direction, one to which he would give the full range of his powers in his last novel, written more than 13 years after *Crime and Punishment*.

**Suggested Reading:**

Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky—The Miraculous Years, 1865–71*, vol. 4.

**Questions to Consider:**

**l.** In the struggle between Dunya, Raskol'nikov's sister, and Svidrigailov, her would-be seducer—and a diabolical presence in the novel—who actually has the upper hand, both morally and physically?

**2.** Sonya Marmeladova, the daughter of the drunkard and the consoler of Raskol'nikov, is often seen as an angelic presence in the novel. To what extent is she a convincing force for the protagonist's redemption? Is that force believable?

# Lecture Fourteen
# The Generation of the Karamazovs

**Scope:** Throughout the 1870s, Dostoevsky became ever more deeply obsessed with what the Russians called "the eternal questions": the relationship between the eternal human desire for freedom and the desire for love; the wellsprings of human attachment and, equally, human hate; the problem of passing on humankind's greatest achievements from one generation to another. Underlying all these issues lay the question of God's existence and his order in the universe. In the process of wrestling with these problems, Dostoevsky created the Karamazov family, whose lives, passions, and lusts vividly grasped the creative imagination not only of the 19th century but of many centuries to come. Dmitrii Karamazov, the sensualist among the brothers, puts it very succinctly: "In this world there is nothing higher than the ideal of the Madonna, and nothing lower than the Karamazov conscience." Ivan Karamazov, the intellectual, puts forward the greatest doubts that puzzle the Christian believer.

## Outline

**I.** All through the 1870s, Dostoevsky was concerned with the many problems connected with sin and with Christian faith.

**A.** By that time, he had become an ardent supporter of the tsarist regime and its close ally, the Russian Orthodox Church. Yet, at the same time, few people understood as well or as deeply as Dostoevsky the force of the atheist argument so popular among the Russian intelligentsia at that time.

**B.** He gave a great deal of thought and energy to the notion of constructing a literary character who would be a great sinner yet would eventually transcend that sin in finding Christ. In order to do this, Dostoevsky went back to the *Lives of the Saints* and the concept of the two different kinds of saints: the kind who was saintly throughout his life and the kind who sinned his way to sainthood.

**II.** In May of 1878, Dostoevsky faced a terrible loss: His favorite child, the three-year-old Aleksei, whom he called Alyosha, suddenly fell into terrible convulsions and died before the eyes of his parents. It turned out that the child suffered from epilepsy, inherited from his father.

**A.** Dostoevsky's grief was profound, and Anna Grigor'evna feared for his health, which was rather weak at that time. She decided that he needed to go to a monastery, Optina Pustyn', famous for its connections with many Russian writers.

**B.** The monastery was the home of a Russian monk called an "elder"—a person widely reputed both for holiness and psychological insight into troubled people who came to visit.

**C.** The monk's name was Father Amvrosii, and he gave Dostoevsky several private audiences. Dostoevsky returned from the visit in a much more settled frame of mind, ready to continue work on his great novel.

**D.** It is clear that Father Amvrosii was the model for the character of Father Zosima, the elder in *The Brothers Karamazov.*

**E.** It is equally clear that the character of Alyosha Karamazov has a connection with Dostoevsky's young son.

**III.** The opening of the novel tells us a great deal. After his dedication to Anna Grigor'evna, Dostoevsky presents an epigraph quoted from the New Testament book of John. It is a famous preachment by Jesus, concerning a seed of wheat that will render a rich harvest only if it first dies in the ground. Clearly, the novel concerns, among other things, the Christological issue of resurrection.

**A.** Dostoevsky takes great care to introduce his hero, Aleksei Fedorovich Karamazov (to be called Alyosha), with a certain amount of ironic humor. Among critics, there has been considerable controversy about which brother is the central protagonist in the novel.

**1.** In the initial words from the author, Dostoevsky makes it clear that Alyosha is the hero, and many critics will react negatively, because he will seem so virtuous and bland.

**2.** Dostoevsky says he is talking about a certain kind of "clarity" of character. But the kind of clarity that was accepted in Pushkin's time was no longer accepted in Dostoevsky's time.

**B.** The novel opens with the introduction of Fedor Pavlovich Karamazov, the father of the family. He is a debauched sensualist, with many repulsive human traits. Yet he is the most intelligent character in the novel. He has four sons: Dmitrii, Ivan, Alyosha, and Smerdiakov.

**C.** Dmitrii, the eldest son, is a sensualist like his father. He is in love with a woman with whom his father is also in love, creating a conflict between the two men. This will cast suspicions on Dmitrii after the father is found murdered.

**D.** Smerdiakov ("the stinking one") is named after his mother, a holy fool called Smerdiashchaia ("Stinking") Lizaveta. Fedor had fathered this son on a dare from his companions.

**E.** The focus is on the third son, Alyosha, who wants to be a monk. Curiously, he becomes the favorite of his profligate father. Yet even Alyosha shows the Karamazov side of his character, when he refuses to do anything to prevent the murder that is being plotted within his family.

**F.** The old man asks whether God exists. Alyosha answers yes; Ivan says no. The old man acts as if he is in a quandary: "Whom, then, am I to believe?" This question, of course, continues throughout the book.

**IV.** Dmitrii seeks out his brother Alyosha to talk about some of the terrible things he has done. He speaks the famous words:

> Beauty! I can't bear the fact that a person with the best heart and the highest mind begins with the ideal of the Madonna and ends up with Sodom. It's even more terrible that a person with the ideal of Sodom in his soul does not reject the ideal of the Madonna. His soul burns with that ideal, truly, truly it burns as it did in his younger, innocent years. No, the human creature is broad, even way too broad. I would make him narrower.

**A.** Here, we have the height of Dostoevsky's statement about the moral and psychological complexity of human reality, the deep divisions in the human personality, with which every one of us struggles.

**B.** As Dmitrii struggles with his own passion and lust, Alyosha sees the decent side of his brother, even as he sees his deep weaknesses.

All of these things take place inside a part of the novel called "The Sensualists."

**C.** Later, in another part of the novel called "Pro and Contra," Alyosha is witness to the passions of his brother.

**D.** Ivan has been very eager to see his brother Alyosha, from whom he has been separated for some years. They meet in a tavern, and Ivan begins to test his brother's faith.

**1.** Ivan says that he does not reject the idea of paradise; he simply refuses to accept the ticket at the cost of even one drop of innocent human blood.

**2.** Alyosha argues that there is one figure in history who could find forgiveness for even the most horrendous of crimes. Ivan immediately counters with his "Tale of the Grand Inquisitor."

**V.** This tale is perhaps the most commonly quoted and studied fragment of any novel. It is gripping, puzzling, and—for most readers—impossible to put down.

**A.** The story takes place in 15th-century Seville, Spain, after an *auto-da-fé*, during which people have been tortured and killed because the Church deemed them heretics. All was done *ad maiorem gloriam Dei*, for the greater glory of God.

**B.** On the public square is a coffin, containing the body of a dead young girl. Suddenly, Jesus appears and is immediately recognized by everyone. Assuaging the grief of the family, Jesus pronounces the biblical words "*Talifa kumi*" ("maiden arise"), and she does just that. The crowd joyfully hails the appearance of the Savior.

**C.** Suddenly, an old man, the Grand Inquisitor, arrives on his way back from the executions. Frowningly, he orders the immediate arrest of Jesus. Such is his authority that no one dares oppose him.

**D.** The scene then shifts to the holding cell in the prison, where the old man confronts Jesus with the curious accusation that the Savior has been obstructing the work of the Christian Church.

**1.** How could it be that Jesus Christ himself could be a stumbling block to those who call themselves Christians?

**2.** In many ways, it is a question useful to the very atheists whom Dostoevsky is presumably attacking in the novel.

**E.** It turns out that the Grand Inquisitor is attacking Christ because the Savior wanted people to come to him and his teachings freely,

without coercion. He wanted to attract them neither by miracle nor by guilt, but only by the purest of human love.

**F.** The Grand Inquisitor claims to know humankind, with all our weaknesses, far better than Christ knows us. The old man claims that human creatures are weak; the masses require and always worship those who dominate them.

**G.** It is not hard to understand why this book is considered so prescient toward the 20th century, and—let us hope not!—possibly for the 21st. Dostoevsky sensed, to a degree virtually unparalleled among his peers, the threats of totalitarianism in our times.

**H.** The Grand Inquisitor proceeds to use the famous New Testament story that describes how the devil attempts to seduce Christ by urging the great teacher to use bread, miracles, and authority. In every case, Jesus refuses, saying, "not by bread alone," "Tempt not the Lord thy God," and finally, "Get thee behind me, Satan." These are great words.

**I.** But the Grand Inquisitor tells Jesus that he was all wrong.

**J.** Through all of this brilliant harangue, Jesus sits silent. He then kisses the Grand Inquisitor on the lips and departs, silently.

**K.** Alyosha responds to Ivan's tale with great excitement but without much understanding: Is this praise of Jesus, an attack on the Church, a sick fantasy, or what? Ivan replies with irony, about how people are unable to digest fantasy and imagination.

**L.** But Dostoevsky gives Alyosha his ironic revenge: He kisses his brother's lips and silently departs. "Plagiarism!" shouts Ivan. Seldom has modern literature reached such a height of emotion or spiritual penetration.

**Suggested Reading:**

Fedor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Robert L. Jackson, ed., *A New Word on the Brothers Karamazov*.

**Questions to Consider:**

**1.** In what ways does Dostoevsky make the saintly brother, Alyosha, a genuine part of the sinning and sensual Karamazov nature? Does this lower his moral status in the eyes of the reader?

**2.** Why is the Grand Inquisitor so confident that he can correct the mistakes of Jesus, the founder of the church that gives the old man his authority? Is Dostoevsky saying something here about the nature of human self-confidence?

# Lecture Fifteen
# The Novelistic Presence of Christ and Satan

**Scope:** Dostoevsky replies to the problems posed by the Grand Inquisitor with the teachings of the elder, Father Zosima. Alyosha tries to follow these precepts and ends up close to a loss of faith, saved by Grushen'ka, the one who is supposed to be an infernal woman. Ivan has his famous interview with an ironic devil who deals all too succinctly with the intellectual's problems. The whole affair is interrupted and then completed with Dmitrii's trial, where the wrong person is convicted for a murder whose real culprit we readers have met through Ivan's interviews with Smerdiakov. The final statement of the novel comes through Alyosha's sermon at the gravestone of a young boy who has died. He leaves us at the edge of a hint about the reality of Christian resurrection, while the author leaves us a virtually unmatched literary masterpiece.

## Outline

**I.** At the time of writing *The Brothers Karamazov* in the late 1870s, Dostoevsky was well known and respected in the court of Tsar Aleksandr II, Russia's most liberal tsar, whose regime had liberated the overwhelming majority of his subjects from serfdom.

**A.** In the court was a very conservative high-church official and thinker named Pobedonostsev. Dostoevsky would sometimes send him copies of unfinished manuscripts.

**B.** When Pobedonostsev read "The Tale of the Grand Inquisitor," he interpreted it as an argument for atheism and accused Dostoevsky of betraying his own pro-religious convictions.

**C.** Dostoevsky replied that he had only wanted to show the Russian atheists that he could make a better argument with his writing finger than they could with their whole heads put together. But he told his critic at court not to worry, because the rest of the novel would be a refutation of the argument.

**D.** Clearly, Dostoevsky intended to accomplish this refutation through the character and teachings of Father Zosima. As we read this section, we realize that Dostoevsky is creating a new gospel for the

19th century, the 20th century, and, perhaps, the 21st century as well.

1. Dostoevsky's "gospel" is about the life and teaching of Zosima, showing that he was one of those saints who sinned his way to monkdom.
2. Zosima urged his fellow monks to respond to people's suffering with love. For Zosima, hell is where it is impossible to receive love.

**E.** We also learn that Father Zosima instructed Alyosha to go out into the world. He cannot escape responsibility for his brothers. He must give a positive answer to the Bible's greatest question, posed by Cain in Genesis: "Am I my brother's keeper?"

**F.** Alyosha sets great store by his elder's instruction, and he is sure his mentor will die in sanctity, meaning that his dead body will emanate fragrance, rather than stench.

1. This being a Dostoevsky novel, full of smells, as personified by Smerdiakov and his mother, one can almost predict the next step.
2. The elder's corpse not only smells in the normal way, but the smell arises more quickly and more intensely than usual.

**G.** Alyosha is so devastated that he thinks he is losing his faith; he leaves the monastery. In so doing, ironically, he is still following the instructions of his deceased elder. Dostoevsky always proceeds by paradox.

**II.** Alyosha manages to break some of his own monkish vows. He has drunk vodka, and he has eaten sausage.

**A.** Dostoevsky now puts us in proximity to one of the infernal women in the novel, perhaps his greatest female creation. Grushen'ka, who has seduced at least two members of the Karamazov family, now has her eyes greedily fixed on Alyosha, whom she sees as the little saint. She manages to get Alyosha to visit her.

**B.** Suddenly Grushen'ka sits on Alyosha's lap and starts to embrace him. He is a young man who has never been close to a woman before, and he thinks of such situations only with fear and trembling.

**C.** In the midst of this provocative situation, Grushen'ka suddenly learns of the elder's death. She is immediately overcome by

remorse and guilt. She quickly gets up from Alyosha's lap and tries to face her own self-loathing and guilt.

**D.** She says that, for once in her life, she may have done right when she stopped abusing Alyosha.

**E.** It is in this context that Alyosha recovers the spiritual strength that he received from Father Zosima, and he is once more content with his faith.

**III.** For Alyosha's brother Dmitrii, the brush with women has not been as salutary. Having been deeply involved with Katerina Ivanovna, the daughter of his military commander, Dmitrii then feels strongly attracted to Grushen'ka, the object of his father's affections.

**A.** Once again, we are confronted with a murder scene in a Dostoevsky novel. Although Dmitrii is present at the time that his father is murdered, the circumstances are not immediately clear. Still, Dmitrii is suspected of having committed parricide. His dislike of his father was well known, and he had bloodstains on his clothes.

**B.** Meanwhile, he goes on a mad dash for Grushen'ka, only to learn that she has gone off to meet a former Polish lover. He splurges a great deal of money on a feast to take to her in the town to which she fled.

**C.** In a magnificent description of a Russian feast, Dostoevsky sets the scene for Dmitrii's successful wooing of Grushen'ka. Their blissful dreams are, however, interrupted by the arrival of the police and the chief investigator.

**D.** Dmitrii then has to go through the complete humiliation of a police interrogation, where every fact seems to increase the weight of evidence indicating parricide, which Dmitrii insists on denying.

**E.** The ultimate humiliation is the personal search, during which he must completely undress, exposing a misshapen toe that has always embarrassed him.

**1.** We get a replay here of the exposure of the unadorned self in Dostoevsky's *Poor Folk* and in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, when the old king comes out undressed in the storm.

**2.** Human nakedness is both a physical condition and a view into the exposed human soul.

**F.** It soon becomes clear that Dmitrii will be tried for his father's murder.

**IV.** Meanwhile, Ivan is beginning to feel a terrible sense of guilt for the murder of his father, because it is he who has preached to the world that there is no God and, therefore, that everything is allowed.

**A.** Ivan's half-brother Smerdiakov is strongly attracted to the idea that if there is no God, he can do anything he wants. It is interesting that Sigmund Freud considered *The Brothers Karamazov* one of the world's three greatest literary tragedies, along with Sophocles's *Oedipus* Rex and Shakespeare's *Hamlet.*

**B.** Ivan decides to visit Smerdiakov, who tells Ivan it was he who murdered their father.

**C.** Ivan becomes sick and almost insane.

**D.** Alyosha comes to announce that Smerdiakov has just hanged himself.

**V.** Dmitrii's trial takes place, and he is found guilty at a trial that exemplifies all the rules and procedures of the reformed Russian legal system.

**A.** The defense attorney actually believes that Dmitrii is guilty but, according to the rules of the reformed legal system, makes the cleverest arguments he can for his client.

**B.** We readers know that, contrary to his own beliefs, his arguments are correct. Dmitrii is innocent.

**C.** At the final moment, Katerina Ivanovna, jealous of Dmitrii's love for Grushen'ka, produces a letter that Dmitrii had written to her. In it, Dmitrii says that he hates his father, wishes him dead, and will plan his father's murder.

**D.** The balance is tipped, and Dmitrii is convicted. The whole question of guilt and punishment is a much more complicated matter than a human legal system can grasp, or so argues Dostoevsky.

**VI.** The final statement of the novel comes with Alyosha's sermon at the gravestone of a young boy who has just died; he was part of a group of children whom Alyosha is mentoring toward a better future in Russia.

**A.** Dostoevsky lets slip one phrase: No smell comes from the coffin of the young boy. This information, of course, resounds immediately with the memory of Zosima's coffin and the smell that emanated from it.

**B.** Many natural reasons can explain the contrast: age versus youth, death in summer versus death in winter, and so on. Yet the fact remains that fragrance and freshness are possible, even in death, and salvation and immortality lie within reach, if not within certainty.

**VII.** Dostoevsky leaves us on the edge, just a few months before his own death in 1881. His is a literary legacy that will not soon be forgotten.

**Suggested Reading:**

Robert Belknap, *The Genesis of the Brothers Karamazov*.

Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky—The Mantle of the Prophet, 1871–81*, vol. 5.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. When Ivan makes contact with the world around him, through Smerdiakov, the result is a murderous disaster. What evidence does Dostoevsky give to show that Alyosha's going out into the world will produce better results?
2. Dmitrii is convicted for a crime that we know he did not commit. Is this conviction a commentary on the legal reforms in Russia, or is it a statement about Dmitrii's moral need for suffering?

# Lecture Sixteen
# Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy, 1828–1910

**Scope:** In the large novels by Tolstoy, the reader often feels as if he or she is entering an entire universe. Although this is undoubtedly an exaggeration, there is something God-like about the massiveness and the life-giving quality of Tolstoy's writing. His life spans almost the whole period of highest Russian literary creativity. His opinions cover a vast range of Russian and human affairs, yet he can also be concerned with the smallest and most banal details of everyday family life. This dichotomy is perhaps best summed up in the beginning of his second great novel, *Anna Karenina*: "All happy families resemble one another; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. All was confusion in the Oblonsky household." This literary giant lost his mother at an early age and his father not much later. He was thrown out of the University of Kazan', and he partook in the fighting of the Crimean War in 1854–1855. His first work was a remarkable account of childhood, adolescence, and youth; shortly thereafter, he published an account of the long and bloody battle for the city of Sevastopol', which controls the sea access to Crimea. A Siberian prisoner was deeply impressed by the writing of the young man. That prisoner's name was F. M. Dostoevsky.

## Outline

**I.** Tolstoy was born into an aristocratic family, the owners of estates in the Russian countryside near the city of Tula, to the southeast of Moscow. His mother died when he was an infant, and his father died when he was a young boy; he was mostly brought up by aunts. He would eventually possess an inherited estate, Iasnaia Poliana ("Clear Glade"). The name of this country home and farm, near Tula, would later become world famous.

**A.** As a young man, Tolstoy was sent off to the old and well-established University of Kazan'. His high intelligence, together with his wild addiction to gambling and the pursuit of women, did not escape the notice of university officials.

**B.** The president of the university was a man by the name of Lobachevsky, one of the most famous names in the 19th-century history of mathematics. He tried to talk sense to the young man, urging him to use his remarkable talent and intellect for good purposes within the university and to behave himself in a more circumspect manner, appropriate—in Lobachecsky's opinion—to a person bearing the title belonging to a member of the Tolstoy family.

**C.** Tolstoy, even as a young man, had a very different idea of what was appropriate behavior for a Russian aristocrat. He did not change his ways and soon, in 1847, found himself excluded from the university. In no way reformed by his experience or the good advice of Lobachevsky, Tolstoy continued his dissolute life in Moscow and in St. Petersburg.

**II.** In 1854, he wrote the first of a three-part story. The later parts were called *Adolescence* and *Youth*. He sent *Childhood* to Nekrasov, the same editor who had discovered and encouraged the young Dostoevsky in 1845; the editor was obviously a man who recognized genuine talent when he saw it.

**A.** *Childhood* is not autobiographical, but Tolstoy's childhood had much to do with the many psychological insights in the story.

**B.** Nekrasov's judgment was fully confirmed by the reactions from readers. Praise flew in from all sides, including from Dostoevsky, although there were some readers who were shocked by a young man picturing his parents and elders with the objective eye of the literary observer, rather than presenting them exclusively with filial devotion.

**C.** Tolstoy was remarkably adroit in beginning his novels. In *Childhood*, he begins with the waking up of the 10-year-old Nikolen'ka. The boy's tutor, a German who has been hired by the family to look after the youngster and educate him, has been swatting flies over his bed.

**1.** Nikolen'ka reacts with annoyance and despair, thinking the German is trying to torture him because he is the youngest in the family.

**2.** Just a few moments later, Nikolen'ka is deeply ashamed of himself for having made up a bad dream about the death of his

mother to explain to Karl Ivanovich his bad mood. He realizes that the tutor is deeply attached to him and wishes him well.

**D.** The highly sensitive nature of the 10-year-old boy, his introspective nature and tendency to constantly analyze his own exaggerated sensitivity and change his judgments about people—these are traits that are representative of the mature Tolstoy.

**E.** As a contrast to Karl Ivanovich, Tolstoy presents a Frenchman, St. Jerome. His cold vanity comes as a complete contrast to the warmth of Karl Ivanovich. The French phrases constantly thrown about by the new tutor serve only to irritate Nikolen'ka and deepen his distaste for the Frenchman, with his petty vanities and self-righteous code of conventional good behavior.

**F.** All through the tales, the expression c*omme il faut* ("as one should behave in good society") takes on a pejorative meaning, both for Nikolen'ka and for the author of the tales. For Tolstoy, *comme il faut* is always a nasty contrast to genuine and natural feeling.

**III.** Nikolen'ka takes considerable pains to show us what real feelings are, as opposed to the surface reactions often presented in society. Verbal expression for Tolstoy was far less important than body language.

**A.** This importance becomes clear when Nikolen'ka goes into his father's study and witnesses a conversation between the aristocratic owner of the estate and his chief steward, a serf.

**1.** When the master spoke, the steward listened with a respectful look on his face. Yet his fingers, clasped behind his back, began to move quickly and in different patterns.

**2.** It was as if his fingers told his secret thoughts, by no means respectful to the master's opinions, as opposed to the words and gestures of respect that the master could see.

**B.** We see this contrast between real emotion and surface convention even more strongly when Nikolen'ka analyzes his own reactions to his mother's death. Although Tolstoy's own mother died when he was 2 years old, Nikolen'ka is more than 10 years old when his mother dies. Nikolen'ka cannot cry, although he knows he is supposed to. It is only much later that he can express his grief.

**C.** This scene has a remarkable psychological resemblance to Stendhal's lightly fictionalized autobiography, *The Life of Henry Brulard.*

**1.** Stendhal talks about his inability to cry at his mother's funeral, precisely because he felt the loss so acutely. People around him could not understand and considered him hard-hearted and unfeeling.

**2.** Tolstoy greatly admired Stendhal at a time when the French writer was not widely popular.

**3.** Yet he could not have read the autobiography, because it was not published until long after Tolstoy's tales.

**4.** This similarity shows how deeply the psychology and the writing of the two men ran parallel, despite their national and ideological differences.

**IV.** Tolstoy also has a great deal to say about education in these tales. For example, by listening to St. Jerome, Nikolen'ka was able to pass the university entrance examination, but at the same time, he totally rejected everything St. Jerome did, because he considered him a person of terrible vanity.

**V.** The narrator of these tales does have one statement that reverberates through Tolstoy and through literature.

**A.** "*Schastlivaia, schastlivaia, nevozvratimaia pora detstva! Kak ne liubit', ne leleiat' vospominanii o nei? Vospominaniia eti osvezhaiut, vozvyshaiut moiu dushu…*" ("O happy, happy, irretrievable time of childhood! How is it possible not to love, not to cuddle its memories? These memories refresh me and raise up my soul…")

**B.** Something in the essence of childhood is deeply moving to Tolstoy. The quality of childishness is very important to understanding the psychology and characters of the mature author.

**VI.** During the time that he was writing about the life of Nikolen'ka and at least partly about his own upbringing, Tolstoy was also serving as an officer in the Russian army during its disastrous campaigns in the Crimean War (1854–1855). He described military life and the terrible destruction of war in a way that gripped the imaginations of many readers.

**A.** The stories were all entitled *Sevastopol'*, the fortified city on the south of the Crimean peninsula, which juts out below Russia into the Black Sea. It was besieged by the British, French, and Turkish allies and defended heroically—but in the end unsuccessfully—by the Russian troops described by Tolstoy.

**B.** In the beginning, inspired by the kind of patriotism common at the beginning of a war, Tolstoy described events in a way that gained great favor from the Russian government.

**C.** In the second and third installments, Tolstoy gave a realistic picture of the horrors and some of the confusion on the Russian side. This picture was received less favorably by the Russian government, and Tolstoy was denied advancement in the military. He later said that he could not be a general in the army, so he would be a general in literature.

**D.** He had a lot to say about the nature of true courage and steadfastness, as opposed to the phony kind, often touted in military rhetoric. The collection of stories shows his thinking about the realities of wartime and the famous military valor of the Russian army. One can easily see how Tolstoy put this thinking together with the accounts he had read in Stendhal's novel *The Charterhouse of Parma.*

**E.** In Stendhal's novel, the protagonist, Fabrizio, who worships Napoleon, moves heaven and earth to fight with Napoleon's forces. Fabrizio is at the Battle of Waterloo, which we see not through the strategy of the generals and military analysis, but through the eyes of a drunken man. Yet he exhibited courage beyond what was officially touted as courage.

**F.** For Tolstoy, genuine courage was found in the common soldiers who held their ground through great suffering yet were often totally ignored by the government.

**VII.** It is equally important to remember Tolstoy's famous statement near the end of the second fragment called *Sevastopol*'. In answer to his readers' questions, "Where is your expression of evil… where is kindness…? Who is the villain, who is the hero?" Tolstoy says: "The hero of my tale, whom I love with all my soul's powers, whom I have tried to evoke in all his beauty, and who always was, is, and will be magnificent, is the truth." There could not be a better place to begin our consideration of *War and Peace.*

**A.** Tolstoy's experience of the Crimean War taught him a great deal about war and the military, whereas his understanding of peace encompassed a great deal of what people call the banality of everyday family life and relationships.

**B.** Family life, for Tolstoy, is also discernible in war. Thus, his *Tales of Sevastopol'* is the workbook for his grand novels, in which no two individuals or animals are alike.

**Suggested Reading:**

T. G. S. Cain, *Tolstoy*.

Lev Tolstoy, *Childhood, Boyhood, and Youth*, translated and with an introduction by Michael Scammell.

———, *Tales of Army Life*, translated by Louise and Aylmer Maude.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. Is the notion of *comme il faut*—the ordinary conventions of polite society—as bad as Tolstoy presents it? What would the author reply to a person who defended the necessity of day-to-day conventions and politeness in a civil society?
2. In seeking the truth, which Tolstoy calls the real hero of his Sevastopol' tales, how does he arrive at his notion of military bravery, shorn of its official governmental exaggerations?

# Lecture Seventeen
# Tale of Two Cities and a Country Home

**Scope:** After the young Tolstoy settled down to domestic life, at the famous estate at Iasnaia Poliana, he used his military experience, his reading of Stendhal, and his wife, Sofiia Andreevna née Bers, to great purpose. Between 1865 and 1869, he wrote and rewrote a 1,500-page novel about warfare and its effect on family life. His wife recopied the manuscript seven times! Starting out to write about the Decembrist Uprising of 1825, he pushed back to the events of 1801 and 1802, then went forward to the great Napoleonic invasion of 1812. The magnificent St. Petersburg, so elevated by Pushkin and Dostoevsky, was now presented as the cold city of bureaucrats and power-seekers, enlivened only by a young man, Pierre Bezukhov, who clashed with the norms of aristocratic society. We then see the contrasting city of Moscow, the home of the marvelously warm Rostov family, followed by the Bolkonsky estate out in the Russian countryside. The Bolkonsky family shows the order coming out of the 18th-century French Enlightenment, leavened by the true Christianity and luminous eyes of Princess Mariia Bolkonskaia.

## Outline

**I.** The middle of the 1850s and the end of the Crimean War saw the death of Tsar Nikolai I and the ascent to the throne of a new tsar, Aleksandr II, the man whose regime would put an end to serfdom for tens of millions of Russian peasants.

**A.** A new spirit of political and social reform swept over Russia, which included the return from Siberian exile of the Decembrist rebels of 1825. Their return aroused a new and widespread interest in that period.

**B.** Tolstoy decided to investigate the nature of events that caused the uprising, and he realized that he would have to go back in history before 1825. In truth, he would have to think about the nature of history itself. This led him to a consideration of Napoleon's invasion of Russia in 1812 and of the whole nature of war and peace.

**II.** His novel *War and Peace* begins brilliantly with the exclamation of a highly placed aristocratic woman in St. Petersburg of the very early 19th century. She is greeting a guest to her salon in a manner modeled directly on the 18th-century French custom, and she speaks almost completely in French, with but a few Russian words thrown in:

> *Eh bien, mon prince, Gènes et Lucques ne sont plus que des apanages, des pomest'ia de la famille Bonaparte. Non, je vous previens que si vous me ne dites pas que nous avons la guerre, si vous vous permettez encore de pallier toutes les infamies, toutes les atrocités de cet Antichrist… je ne vous connais plus, vous n'êtes plus mon ami, vous n'êtes plus moi vernyi rab, comme vous dîtes. Nu zdravstvuite, zdravstvuite. Je vois que je vous fais peur, sadites' i rasskazyvaite.*
>
> Well, my prince, Genoa and Lucca are no more than family places for the Bonapartes. No, I warn you that if you don't tell me that we shall have war, if you still permit yourself to ignore all the infamies, all the atrocities of this Antichrist…I shall recognize you no longer, you are no longer my friend, you are no longer my obedient servant, as you call yourself. Well, greetings, greetings. I see that I've frightened you. Sit down, and tell me about what is happening.

**A.** At one and the same time, Tolstoy catches the aristocratic Russian superpatriot, raging against the upstart Bonaparte, and the woman who has been brought up to communicate in French, the language of aristocracy and civilization. She runs her salon with the mastery of a factory owner running his machines. Hers is what Tolstoy calls a conversation machine.

**B.** In the first scene, we meet the Kuragin family, with its father, Prince Vasilii. The Kuragin family personifies Tolstoy's attitude toward the capital city of St. Petersburg. It is a place of cold and scheming bureaucracy, and it tends to stifle the expression of genuine human emotion. This city is quite different from the one we have seen in Pushkin, Gogol', and Dostoevsky.

**C.** Prince Vasilii has an incredibly beautiful daughter, called La Belle Helène, and two sons: Anatolii, a wastrel and scoundrel, and Hippolyte, an idiot.

**D.** The atmosphere is somewhat lightened by the presence of two young friends who will convey many of Tolstoy's ideas throughout the novel.

**1.** We meet Pierre Bezukhov, a young man educated in revolutionary France, who holds opinions that scandalize the hostess of the salon. He is also a bastard son of the rich Count Bezukhov, a fact that links him even more to nature rather than to the artifices of society.

**2.** He is joined by his friend Andrei Bolkonsky, scion of one of Russia's most prominent families and a person determined to be his own man.

**III.** One of the greatest elements of Tolstoy's art is that his characters develop as in real life.

**A.** Pierre goes to Andrei's house and meets Andrei's beautiful wife. She is treated badly by Andrei, who sees her as totally empty. Pierre is upset when he witnesses this abuse.

**B.** We move to Moscow, a very different city from St. Petersburg at that time. Here, we enter into the house of the Rostov family. The father, Count Rostov, represents one of Tolstoy's favorite depictions of human nature. The old man does almost everything wrong.

**1.** He squanders the considerable amount of money he received from his wife's dowry, and he will leave his family in difficult material circumstances.

**2.** He has only the vaguest ideas, or interests, in child rearing; he refuses to think seriously about their problems.

**3.** He falls victim to the cheapest form of patriotism.

**4.** Yet we cannot help but love him, as do all the people around him. And he produces two of the most adorable children in the world.

**C.** Natasha Rostova, the third child by birth order, is the all-time darling of Russian readers. Together with Pushkin's Tatiana Larina, from *Eugene Onegin*, she is the Russian dream of femininity: quick to understand and react, extraordinarily responsive and sensitive to other people's feelings, unconquerable in her decent sense of morality.

**1.** She serves as a compass to all of our feelings of integrity and selfless love.

2. She is quite capable of stumbling over her weaknesses, and she knows what suffering is, but she is always able to transcend the low sides of human feelings and come up with the best.

**D.** Nikolai Rostov, the second child in birth order, is the person you would always want to have on your side in a fight. He stubbornly sticks to his principles and to his friends. He makes no pretense of cleverness or high intellect, yet his feelings are always true and admirable, even when they conflict with the rules and conventions around him.

**E.** Vera Rostova is the very picture of an oldest child trying to hold her own against a younger brother and sister who are tremendously attractive. She manages to irritate them and many others around her with her petty notions of morality. Yet we sympathize with her because we know her situation so well.

**F.** The youngest brother, Petya, will play a tremendous role later in the novel when he goes to war, for which he pays a terrible penalty.

**G.** It is almost incredible how much life and warmth Tolstoy creates in these characters. Tolstoy's domestic scenes in Moscow are the very essence of family life. And he presents them with the simplest of words and phrases.

**IV.** Tolstoy then takes us to what has traditionally been considered the heart of Russia—the old aristocratic estates of the Russian countryside.

**A.** Here, we will meet the members of Andrei Bolkonsky's family, headed by Prince Nikolai Andreevich Bolkonsky, the super-rational product of the 18th-century French Enlightenment as it was perceived in Russia. He appears to be a cold man, but behind this façade is a warm, thinking, and admirable person.

**B.** His daughter, Princess Mariia, seems physically ugly at a superficial glance. Even her father, in the presence of company at the dinner table, calls her ugly.

**C.** But, typically for Tolstoy, we see into her character through another physical characteristic, her deep and luminous eyes. They give evidence of a deeply religious spirit, in the best spiritual sense of that word.

1. She is determined to live her life to bring comfort and understanding to the people around her.
2. This determination most especially includes her father, who treats her badly. She understands that he cannot live without her.

**D.** In the unforgettable scene in which he tries to teach her geometry, Mariia can only sense the smell of his cigar and can make neither head nor tail of the primly logical postulates of mathematically defined space. Yet, in spite of this, Tolstoy makes the love between them come through to us.

**E.** Mariia reserves her understanding for a group of poor wanderers, "God's folk," whom she receives and comforts in her parts of the house, much to her father's distaste.

**F.** She does have a correspondent friend from St. Petersburg society, Julie Karagina, who tries to fill her in on the latest gossip. Mariia replies with admonitions to live as Christ lived. Her father is as much disgusted by the correspondence as by the group of God's folk, yet he grumblingly allows his daughter to live as she sees fit.

**G.** Prince Vasilii is trying to make a match between Mariia and his son Anatolii, because he needs Prince Bolkonsky's money. Bolkonsky views with distaste the prospect of his daughter's marriage to Anatolii.

**H.** When Bolkonsky's servants clear the snow in preparation for Prince Vasilii's visit, Bolkonsky demands that they put it all back! This scene illustrates the perversity and power of Bolkonsky.

**Suggested Reading:**

Gary Saul Morson, *Hidden in Plain View: Narrative and Creative Potentials in "War and Peace*."

Lev Tolstoy, *War and Peace*.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. How does the fact that the early-19th-century Russian aristocracy spoke mostly in the French language, and even thought in French, affect their society at a time when Russia would soon face the threat of Napoleonic invasion?

**2.** What contrasts do you see between the warm, fun-loving Rostov family life in Moscow and the highly disciplined, tightly organized Bolkonsky family life in their Russian country estate? What do these contrasts do for the shape of the novel?

# Lecture Eighteen
# Family Life Meets Military Life

**Scope:** What happens when good family people with rich domestic experience meet the hideous bloodshed of a massive war, the most massive one Europe had known up to the year 1812? How did Napoleon's Grande Armée affect the nation with the largest land mass in the world? Tolstoy shows us how through his extraordinary characters. Nikolai Rostov, the young man filled with sincere patriotism, seeks glorious death for the sake of the tsar and the fatherland. But when the French soldiers shoot at him, he wonders why anyone would want to kill such a nice person as himself. Andrei Bolkonsky discovers the nature of true courage and fortitude, plus the blue sky over the Battle of Austerlitz. This discovery is intensified at the Battle of Borodino, paradigm of all modern mass battles, from Gettysburg to Stalingrad. And a great deal of this experience is seen through the eyes of the loveliest feminine creature in 19th-century literature, whom no one can resist loving: Natasha Rostova.

## Outline

**I.** After the well-organized routines that we observed in the families living in tsarist Russia, we see the equally regularized life of the Russian army in peacetime. Of course, the soldiers are all aware of the looming threat of the fight with the army of Napoleon, but in the beginning, that is far away. What Nikolai Rostov and his companions face are the day-to-day operations and problems of army life.

**A.** Because of his social standing as a count, Nikolai enters the army as an officer, with his own servant, equipment, and horse. He is prepared to behave himself as he always does: with generosity, an open heart, and feelings that are crystal clear to all. He has been completely taken in by the ideology of patriotism. He wants his fellow officers to accept him as one of them and to know that he is a decent fellow.

**B.** To his dismay, he soon discovers that a fellow officer has covertly taken some money from another officer. With impulsive anger, he

confronts the man and publicly accuses him of thievery and nasty behavior.

**C.** To Nikolai's surprise, he soon discovers that the villain of the piece is himself, not the thief. Nikolai is guilty because he has publicly questioned the honor of another man in his regiment, and this reflects badly on the reputation of the entire unit. The more senior officers pressure him to apologize to the thief, thereby defending the collective honor of the group.

**D.** This expectation of Nikolai goes so strongly against the young man's open and honest nature that he finds it well nigh impossible. And he suddenly finds himself in a completely unexpected position: the man who acts against his own military unit, which he adored with all the fervor of young, sincere Russian patriotism.

**E.** This lesson is Nikolai's first in the special nature of honor as conceived by people who by no means share the Rostov family characteristic of openness and honesty.

**F.** The next lesson comes directly through Nikolai's own reactions, when at long last, he enters Austria (a Russian ally), where the regiment has traveled. An inspection is to occur. Marshall Kutuzov demands that his troops wear their old, worn uniforms, because he does not want the Austrians to think that they are ready for battle. The ruse does not work.

**G.** Suddenly, Nikolai sees French uniforms and realizes, with a start, that the soldiers wearing them are shooting at him, Nikolai Rostov, whom everybody loves! How is this possible? What could they possibly have against him? He turns to flee and, luckily, ends up among Russian troops once more, unhurt. He begins to understand the reality behind all the stories of military courage and valor.

**H.** Tolstoy does not depict Nikolai as a coward; he is as brave as a Russian officer should be. But he begins to understand that true valor is not something one boasts about on parade. It is, rather, a determination to hold one's ground; it comes from experience and a certain kind of maturity.

**I.** Nikolai becomes skeptical of those who boast about their courage. Tolstoy shows us another scene in which an artillery officer is in mid-battle and facing enormous odds.

**1.** His troops hold their ground until there are only one or two guns left, and many men have been killed. The officer is

criticized for not returning with the last gun. Andrei Bolkonsky defends the officer.

2. With these scenes, we begin to understand the complications of war and that such complications can parallel family life and its values.

**II.** A wonderful interlude serves as a kind of intermezzo in the course of the novel.

**A.** Nikolai returns from the army at the behest of his mother, who is worried about the financial ruin facing the family as a result of the irresponsible fiscal behavior of the old Count Rostov.

**B.** Nikolai inspects the monetary records and immediately threatens the steward, who has been cooking the books. The old count listens to the excuses of the steward and defends him, whereupon Nikolai gives up completely on any attempt to control the situation.

**C.** Instead, they take advantage of the glorious weather for hunting. We find ourselves embarked on a traditional Russian hunt, the beloved diversion of the Russian aristocracy.

**D.** In contrast to the old count, who only manages to make himself a pest on the field of the hunt, Nikolai rides with both passion and skill. Suddenly, nothing seems so important to him as catching the wolf.

1. When we finally catch sight of the hunted animal, it actually speaks good Russian!
2. It is hard to believe, but Tolstoy makes the reader believe that the animal is talking! Once again, the wizard is at work.

**E.** The master of the hunt is actually a serf, but when he sees the old count bungling his hunter's duties, the serf shouts at him as if their social roles were reversed.

1. The atmosphere of the hunt was so special that it even overruled the rigid caste system of early-19$^{th}$-century Russia.
2. The hunt was its own universe within the more general universe of the country at that time.

**F.** Nikolai meets a character called Uncle, who invites Nikolai and Natasha to his home, where everything is in the order required by the traditional Russian countryside.

1. Nothing seems quite so delicious as the food and drink, and Uncle brings out his guitar and plays Russian songs.
2. Natasha, who has been educated in the French manner, suddenly throws off her shawl and starts to dance like a true Russian girl. Tolstoy says:

> *Gde, kak, kogda vsosala v sebia iz togo russkogo [voz]dukha, kotorym ona dyshala, - eta grafinechka, vospitannaia emigrantkoi frantsuzhenkoi, - etot dukh…?*

("Where, how, and when, out of the Russian air that she breathed, did she absorb this into herself, this little countess, educated by an émigré Frenchwoman, this spirit…?")

Where did Natasha get this spirit, from where did she get those movements, which the *pas de châle* should have wiped out a long time ago? But the spirit and movements were exactly those inimitable, unstudied Russian ones that her dear uncle was expecting from her.

**G.** Once again, Tolstoy is arguing for a direct expression of human feeling, coming from deep inside the individual soul, unlearned and inimitable, the basis of all genuine human relations. It occurs in the intermezzo, but it applies to the entire novel, in scenes of both peace and war. One could almost say that this is not a novel about War and Peace, with capital letters, but rather, about the wars and peaces, with small letters, of the human soul.

**III.** After the intermezzo, Tolstoy takes us back once again into the maelstrom of war, attempting to catch the greatest movements of troops in Europe known at that time.

**A.** Napoleon moved a huge army, put together from many different nationalities, across Europe and into the vast spaces of Russia. He was met by an equally large army of Russians, most of them peasants, trying to stem the thrust of the most famous military tactician at that time.

**B.** In opposition to the figure of Napoleon, Tolstoy gives us the Russian Marshall Kutuzov: heavy, half-blind, deeply skeptical of all brilliant military strategy, and determined to defeat the enemy by relying on patience and the nature of the Russian fighting man.

**C.** When his brilliant generals, many of them German and French military men of international fame, propound their complex battle plans, Kutuzov goes to sleep. He knows a good night's sleep is the most important preparation for battle.

**D.** Following the example of Stendhal in *The Charterhouse of Parma*, Tolstoy shows us the huge Battle of Borodino through the eyes of a man who knows very little about it. Stendhal uses a drunken Fabrizio del Dongo; Tolstoy, a naïve, civilian-clothed Pierre Bezukhov. Both of them make us see the reality more clearly than we would through the eyes of a seasoned expert.

**E.** Andrei Bolkonsky, who will be mortally wounded on the battlefield, had been betrothed to Natasha. But he had left for a year, and during his absence, Natasha received a proposal of marriage from Prince Vasilii's son, Anatolii, who did not tell Natasha that he was already married! When Bolkonsky returned, he called off the marriage to Natasha and was determined to find Anatolii.

**F.** When Andrei is wounded on the Borodino battlefield, he is taken to a ghastly military hospital, where he indeed finds Anatolii, a coincidence that most novelists would not have dared to employ. Yet Tolstoy succeeds.

**G.** The coincidence corresponds to the point that Tolstoy has been making throughout the novel: Human plans, however brilliant and complicated, cannot grasp or control human reality, which goes far beyond the scope of any possible rational plan. Mere coincidence is far more powerful and convincing, at least to the author of *War and Peace*, than the cleverest of human plans and designs.

**H.** How does this novel end? Natasha, now married to Pierre, rushes to him, holding a dirty diaper and says, "Look! It's brown. It's no longer green. The child is no longer sick!" And, thus, the novel ends with a dirty diaper—something that only Tolstoy could bring off.

**Suggested Reading:**

John Bayley, *Tolstoy and the Novel*.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. Nikolai Rostov, the oldest Rostov child in Moscow, goes through extensive military experience and makes a successful marriage with Mariia Bolkonskaia, the religious daughter whose luminous eyes proclaim her great soul. How do both of these experiences teach Nikolai the true meaning of human valor?
2. Natasha Rostova, the darling of almost all Russian readers, experiences closeness both with Andrei Bolkonsky, the doomed cerebral character, and Pierre Bezukhov, the man with a Tolstoyan heart. How does she influence these men, and what does her experience with them do to her as a human being?

# Lecture Nineteen
# Vengeance Is Mine, Saith the Lord

**Scope:** After the publication of *War and Peace*, with fame and controversy raging over his head, Tolstoy turned to the creation of another manuscript, written between 1873 and 1877. It deals, in a way, with the opposite of healthy family life, the theme of adultery. First, in the case of the Oblonsky household, Tolstoy deals with it lightly, ironically, using the title protagonist, Anna Karenina, to bring the family back together. Then, Anna's own adultery, with Count Vronsky, brings a more savage tone, appropriate to the biblical reference (Epistle to the Romans, 12:19) quoted in part as the title of this lecture: "Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord, and I shall requite." Tolstoy pulls off something few writers can achieve. He writes a comic parody that makes fun of his own tragic center of the novel: Steve Oblonsky's comically related adultery in contrast to the tragedy of Anna Karenina's. He also manages to present a woman as seen through the eyes of *other women*: Kitty and Dolly, both of the Shcherbatsky family. I know of no other male writer who ever successfully managed that psychological leap.

## Outline

**I.** Tolstoy tried, throughout the huge canvas of *War and Peace*, which Henry James compared to an elephant hitched not to a carriage but to a coach house, to show his view of history. Many critics castigated him for what they considered banality, because he makes such large issues of everyday feelings and events. Yet, in so doing, he manages to bring to life deeply felt emotions of family life and human struggle that we all know and experience.

**II.** Not long before he began to write *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy had served as a police witness to the disfigured corpse of a woman who had thrown herself under a train. She had been the mistress of a local landowner who then abandoned her. This experience gave a jolt to Tolstoy's imagination, and he started to write about an immoral woman and the inevitable punishment that would result from her behavior.

**A.** The epigraph to the novel is a cruel quotation from the Bible, even stronger in its Church Slavonic wording than the English translation: "*Mne otomshchenie, i az vozdam*" ("Vengeance is mine and I shall requite," Epistle to the Romans, 12:19).

**B.** When Tolstoy began his novel—it went through six or seven drafts, as most of Tolstoy's novels did—he pictured the female protagonist in a very unsympathetic way, whereas her husband was treated as a fine gentleman. But Tolstoy realized that the novel would not be balanced if he developed it that way. He gradually elevated the moral character of the woman (Anna) and diminished the morality of her husband. Thus, Anna engages a tremendous amount of sympathy from the reader, whereas her husband turns into an empty, shortsighted person.

**C.** The beginning of the book has become one of the world's most oft-repeated literary phrases: "*Vse schastlivye sem'i pokhozhi drug na druga, kazhdaia neschastlivaia sem'ia neschastliva po-svoemu*" ("All happy families resemble one another; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own particular way").

**D.** Yet the paragraphs that follow the opening lines convey a different mood and flavor: Everything was upset in the Oblonsky household, because Oblonsky's wife had found out that her husband was carrying on a love affair with the children's French governess. We are introduced to Steve Oblonsky, one of Tolstoy's most endearing characters.

**E.** Like the old Count Rostov whom we saw in *War and Peace*, carelessly going through his wife's substantial dowry so the family would be left penniless, Steve Oblonsky enjoys his pleasures without careful thought for his wife or his children. What these characters do is wrong, yet Tolstoy makes us love them. Tolstoy is no friend of conventional morality, although he is no stranger to human suffering.

**F.** And then, in an almost satiric vein, if one considers the theme of the novel, the one who brings Steve Oblonsky back together with his long- suffering wife, Dolly, is none other than Steve's sister, Anna Karenina.

**1.** Anna makes Dolly understand that she must forgive Steve—a family is at stake, and, in Anna's opinion, what Steve has done is relatively mild.

2. Tolstoy makes all these developments come across in a somewhat comic fashion.

**G.** At still another early point in the novel, Tolstoy shows his unusual understanding of women. Dolly's sister, Kitty, has been through a terrible trauma. She was enticed by the admiration of Count Vronsky, who then changed course and sought the affections of Anna Karenina.

**H.** Dolly comes in to console her sister, who has fallen into a deep depression. Kitty realizes that her sister has come to offer consolation, and this only infuriates her.

1. She then presses Dolly on her sorest point: Kitty tells her that she would never go back to a man who had betrayed her; Dolly might, but she, Kitty, couldn't.
2. For a moment, both sisters realize the strength of the insult and the cruelty. And, suddenly, they both break into tears, "as if they were the necessary lubricant without which the machine of mutual communication between the sisters could not work."

**I.** At this point, it seems to me, Tolstoy does something very unusual, perhaps even unique, for a male writer. He sees the world through feminine eyes, rather than through the eyes of a male observing women from the outside. Even Dostoevsky, with all of his colossal psychological insight, observes his women through male eyes.

**III.** The affair that has developed between Vronsky and Anna Karenina could lead to serious problems. Anna's husband, Aleksei Karenin, a highly placed bureaucrat, seems a cold person, but he loves Anna and is deeply hurt by her infidelity.

**A.** The infliction of physical pain on Karenin is made even more powerful by the famous scene of the officers' steeplechase race.

1. Vronsky is riding a beautiful, sensitive mare named Frou-Frou. He has sense enough to let her take the course, and she jumps at her own will, as Vronsky refrains from giving directions or pressure with the reins. But, at the very last minute, he makes the unpardonable mistake of pulling up her head.
2. Because of Vronsky's clumsiness, the magnificent mare falls with a broken back, and the attendants have to shoot her.

Vronsky shouts out in grief and in guilt. The death of the horse is a foreboding of the tragedy to follow.

**B.** Anna, who has been watching the race, thinks that Vronsky has been hurt, and when her husband sees her reaction, he realizes how very attached to Vronsky she has become. He warns her that if she continues her affair with Vronsky, she will lose both him and her son. But Anna knows she cannot give up Vronsky.

**C.** The physical consummation of Anna and Vronsky's desires affords little pleasure. After the event, she drops her dishonored head, and Vronsky feels what a murderer must feel.

**1.** Tolstoy talks of Anna's spiritual nakedness and compares Vronsky's attempts to cover her with kisses to a murderer hacking his victim's body to pieces, which he will try to hide.

**2.** Tolstoy does not spare the reader's sensibility when he describes horror.

**IV.** But perhaps the most painful moral direction in the novel is given by Anna's nine-year-old son, Serezha.

**A.** We see Serezha later, when he is already in the sole custody of his father. Clearly, the father has not the slightest idea of how to approach a nine-year-old boy, even his own son. Tolstoy is unsparing when it comes to the world of the St. Petersburg bureaucrats. In the author's view, they are completely divorced from reality.

**B.** Tolstoy contrasts this coldness to the love and warmth the boy receives from the simple servants in the house, who teach him how to make windmills. Tolstoy had definite ideas about the education of children: One can open their hearts only with the key of love.

**C.** Anna sees in Serezha's innocence a moral compass that unerringly shows the right and wrong directions for her own life's actions. With great pain, she realizes what her passion with Vronsky will inflict on those around her, most especially her own son.

**D.** This realization sets the context for one of the most moving and painful scenes in the novel. Anna has been forbidden to see her son, who has been told that his mother is either dead or a bad person. She is determined to see him on his birthday. Boldly she arrives at the door, and the servants let her into the house.

**E.** For agonizing moments, mother and son stare at each other, bathed in their mutual tears. He indicates that he never believed that she was dead. But she cannot stay for long; the servants have to get her out of the way before Aleksei Karenin returns.

**F.** This scene is almost impossible to read straight through. Tolstoy grasps the feelings of mother and son so powerfully and so simply that one's whole sensibility rises up against the context.

**G.** The cruelty of this scene is reminiscent of an episode in Tolstoy's life. Once a month, Tolstoy would hold a "consultation" with the surrounding community.

**1.** On one of these occasions, one of his daughters came to him with a rabbit that had a broken foot. Tolstoy took the rabbit and broke its neck in front of his daughter.

**2.** This story seems consonant with Tolstoy's personality. Underneath the wide-flowing love lay a quality of remorselessness, which perhaps explains why he was able to capture the mixed qualities of human beings—both the attractiveness and the cruelty—in his novels.

**V.** Anna and Vronsky go to Italy to avoid the condemnation of St. Petersburg society.

**A.** After Anna has her portrait painted by a professional artist, Vronsky tries his own hand at a portrait.

**B.** But Vronsky is an amateur artist, just as he is an amateur in human relations. His appreciation of Anna is less than that of a true companion in life.

**VI.** When they return from Italy, Anna finds herself ostracized by St. Petersburg society.

**A.** Vronsky, as a man, is free to go anywhere he wants. Anna feels their growing estrangement. Because she is not free to socialize, she becomes upset at Vronsky's absences. She starts taking drugs, and Vronsky becomes more reluctant to return to her.

**B.** Anna's situation is aggravated by the legal machinations of her husband, who is trying to keep order in his life. But even he comes to realize that not all of life can be forced to his will.

**C.** When Dolly visits Anna, she realizes how lucky she is to have a family, even with all its cares.

**VII.** Anna decides to end her life. She is at the railroad. She hears the train approaching and puts her head on the rails. In Tolstoy's words:

> *Muzhichok, prigovarivaia chto-to, rabotal nad zhelezom. I svecha, pri kotoroi ona chitala ispolnennuiu trevog…knigu, vspykhnula bolee iarkim chem. kogda-nibud' svetom … stala merknut' i navsegda potukhla.*
>
> A small peasant was working on the rails, while muttering to himself. And the candle, by which she had read the book filled with anxieties, deceits, suffering, and evil, sputtered up more brightly than ever before, lit up for her what had previously been dark, threw off wax, grew dim, and forever went dark.

**A.** The novel's epilogue leaves Vronsky with a toothache that gnaws terribly inside of him as he volunteers to go off to the Balkan Wars in the midst of a Russian patriotic upsurge, which Tolstoy treats with utter skepticism.

**B.** Vronsky's toothache represents the pain of the adulterous affair and its terrible end.

**Suggested Reading:**

Lev Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, translated by Louise and Aylmer Maude, with an introduction by W. Gareth Jones.

Edward Wasiolek, *Tolstoy's Major Fiction*.

**Questions to Consider:**

**1.** The French theater developed a form called *bedroom farce*; it became so popular that the two words almost came together. Tolstoy has constructed a novel, part of which is a tragedy of the bedroom. In what way can the bedroom farce turn into a bedroom tragedy?

**2.** Nabokov calls *Anna Karenina* a novel about a horse race, obviously referring to Vronsky's ride on the mare named Frou-Frou. To what extent is the critic justified in making that disastrous race a central theme in the novel?

# Lecture Twenty
# Family Life Makes a Comeback

**Scope:** In contrast to the parody and tragedy of the Oblonskys and the Karenins, we see genuine and healthy conjugal life, with all of its attending stresses and joys, destined to last a lifetime. This destiny we observe as the result of the marriage of Kitty, née Shcherbatskaia, and Konstantin Levin, a character in many ways obviously related to his creator, Tolstoy. The novelist's first name is close to the character's family name; the proposal of marriage repeats verbatim the word game Tolstoy used in his own proposal to Sofiia Bers. Perhaps most important, Levin's final religious conversion, or epiphany, parallels Tolstoy's own—which we know will be as temporary; Tolstoy could never stop searching. As Isaiah Berlin put it brilliantly: Tolstoy was born to be a fox, an animal who runs far and wide over the fields; he desperately wanted to become a hedgehog, an animal that remains with one overwhelming insight and defense. *Anna Karenina* magnificently and profoundly shows this truth and this agony.

## Outline

**I.** The publisher of *Anna Karenina* refused to print the skeptical epilogue, saying it was too long. Tolstoy wrote a sarcastic letter to the publisher, which he never sent, because it would have spoiled the image of the "all-loving" Tolstoy. His decision not to send the letter seems something of a paradox in view of his outward support of open expression.

**II.** In contrast to the dark and destructive relationship between Anna and Vronsky, the novel offers us the character and the family life of Konstantin Levin. Not only does his last name coincide with the first name of the author, but many details of his ordinary, daily life also bear a strong resemblance to those of Tolstoy.

**A.** We first see Levin bursting into the office of Steve Oblonsky. Levin is tremendously eager to talk with Oblonsky about the possibility of proposing marriage to Oblonsky's sister-in-law, Kitty Shcherbatskaia.

1. Levin observes the "boring, useless" daily work of the bureaucrats, and he looks with disdain at the long and carefully tended fingernails of Grinevich, Oblonsky's bureaucratic colleague.
2. To Oblonsky's obvious amusement, Levin is repelled by the useless and ostentatious beauty of the fingernails, which would only get in the way of any work that Levin would consider seriously productive, that is, work on his agricultural estate.

**B.** Oblonsky encourages him to act fast with regard to Kitty, because it looks as if Vronsky is pursuing the same goal.

**C.** We then get the marvelous presentation of Levin and Kitty together for the first time. It occurs at an ice-skating pond, where Levin's remarkable physical strength and skill come out in all their glory, and Kitty's young and fresh beauty, combined with genuine sensitivity, make her seem the ideal mate.

**D.** Tolstoy gives this scene a kind of spiritual dimension with a lovely, light touch.
1. The heavily snow-laden Russian birches, in all their majesty, seem "dressed in beautiful edges of icons and solemn priestly robes" ("*Razubrany v torzhestvennye rizy*").
2. Tolstoy thus adds elements of Russian folklore, together with a religious feeling right out of the most beautiful part of Russian nature: the Russian winter.

**E.** Later, Levin is rudely awakened from this idyllic dream when Kitty turns him down.

**III.** Kitty's refusal deeply wounds Levin, who retires to his country estate.

**A.** The seemingly inevitable distancing of Moscow and Russian high society from Levin's life gives us a chance to concentrate on the realities of the Russian countryside, which Tolstoy considered the genuine center of the Russian spirit.

**B.** Levin's old friend Oblonsky comes out to pay a visit, and they quickly find themselves united in the common pursuit of the Russian aristocracy, which we have already seen in *War and Peace*—the hunting of animals.

**C.** All of a sudden, Oblonsky brings up the avoided topic of Kitty. Levin learns that Kitty has been jilted by Vronsky and is seriously ill. Naturally, the news disturbs him.

**D.** But we know we are in a novel by Tolstoy when we learn that the news is even more disturbing to someone else, Laska, the retriever dog, who lifts her ears in canine disgust.

1. She wonders to herself how these stupid people can take a time like this, when the birds are overhead, to talk about irrelevancies.
2. Somehow, once again, Tolstoy makes the verbalization of animals as important, if not more so, as the chatter of human beings.

**E.** Somewhat later in the summer, when Levin's half-brother visits the estate and Levin reacts with some skepticism about the new political institutions in Russia, Levin decides that he needs a break from the frustrations of intellectual argument. To soothe his irritated temper, he picks up a scythe to participate in the mowing of the harvest.

**F.** In one of the most famous scenes by Tolstoy, we get a detailed description of physical labor on the Russian farm. Line by line and row by row, we see the workers attacking the mounds of grass. At first, the scythe feels clumsy in Levin's hands, and his body can barely withstand the unaccustomed strain. Little by little, he gets into the rhythm, and he finds that he can keep up with the peasants, who are no longer laughing at him.

**G.** Suddenly, Levin comes to a very Tolstoyan conclusion: As soon as he lost count of time and forgot to analyze what he was doing, his mowing went well and gave him pleasure. But as soon as he started to think about it, consciously trying to improve, the work went badly and he felt tired.

**H.** As in many other Tolstoyan moments, conscious thought was the enemy of good results. This rejection of conscious thought is, of course, stated by that very same Tolstoy who analyzes every action and feeling of his characters, even of the dogs and the horses! If one is looking for consistency, Tolstoy is not the place to look.

**I.** Thus, it is hardly surprising to discover that Levin, after enjoying the ordered attractiveness of the Russian countryside, abandons his idea of finding marital happiness with a peasant woman. As he

sees Kitty riding by in a carriage, he realizes that she is the only possible woman for him.

**IV.** Having gone through the bitter disappointment of rejection, Levin now meets Kitty at the Oblonsky house in Moscow.

**A.** Levin approaches Kitty at a card table, where she is using the chalk to draw circles on a green cloth.

**B.** Levin takes the chalk and does the same thing that Tolstoy did when he proposed marriage: He writes the first letter of each word in the sentence that he wished to communicate to his prospective bride. She puzzles over it for a short time, then immediately understands that he is asking for a reversal of her previous refusal. She then communicates in the same way, and we understand that both of them are on the same wavelength.

**C.** They marry and Levin discovers the deep discomfort of causing insult and hurt when he least expects it: Kitty is upset and angry when he comes home late. As he begins to remonstrate with her because of what seems to him her unreasonable reaction, he begins to realize that she has already become part of himself. His excited arguments against her are really arguments against himself.

**D.** When a light-minded Vasya Veslovsky comes to Levin's estate and attempts to play the usual societal game of light flirtation with Kitty, Levin burns with inner fury.

**1.** He quickly decides that Veslovsky must leave and confronts the man without any diplomatic niceties, although he knows that he will appear ridiculous in the eyes of the society around him.

**2.** The whole episode has a slightly comic air to it, as observed by Oblonsky, but it is deadly serious to Levin.

**E.** Later in the novel, Levin goes to visit Anna, when she is living in isolation from aristocratic society. To his surprise, he finds a kind of sympathy for her welling up inside of him.

**V.** It is hardly surprising that the final Christian epiphany, which Levin claims to find, seems to be a temporary one. Like Levin, Tolstoy could never stop searching. This trait has been caught by Isaiah Berlin in his essay "The Hedgehog and the Fox."

**A.** Berlin quotes an ancient Greek proverb: The fox knows many things, the hedgehog knows but one. The fox explores all aspects

of the field; his defenses are all over the countryside. The hedgehog has one defense: his sharp quills.

**B.** Berlin believed that all writers were either foxes or hedgehogs.
   **1.** The greatest fox was Shakespeare, because he explored all aspects of human nature.
   **2.** The greatest hedgehogs were Dante and Dostoevsky, because both saw one central salvation that illuminated their entire work.
   **3.** Tolstoy was a fox but would have liked to have been a hedgehog.

**Suggested Reading:**

Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox*.

**Questions to Consider:**

**1.** When the novel presents the ongoing and presumably permanent marriage of Levin and Kitty, Tolstoy is drawing a picture that might be called *Family Happiness*, the title of one of his later novels. How does he make it appear realistic in a way that avoids sentimentality?

**2.** In what way does the doomed affair of Anna Karenina serve as a contrast or, perhaps, reflecting mirror to the happy marriage of Levin and Kitty? Don't forget the novel's epigraph ("Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord…") and Levin's apparent sympathy for Anna near the end of the novel.

# Lecture Twenty-One
# Tolstoy the Preacher

**Scope:** From the 1880s onward, Tolstoy became more and more engrossed in the moral and religious problems he saw within and around him. He even went so far as to renounce and condemn his own masterpieces as vain incense burned at a false altar. Even then, however, he defined art marvelously as the "*chut' chut"* (that which is barely, barely expressed). In 1886 came *The Death of Ivan Il'ich*, and in 1891 appeared *The Kreutzer Sonata*, two masterpieces of the novella form that rivaled both Gogol' and Dostoevsky. In this period, we see Tolstoy as he was masterfully described by Gorky: "Tolstoy and God are like two bears in the same den." His home life became increasingly acrimonious, as his wife and most of his seven children started to do battle with the previously great literary artist, who now seemed to be running for the office of God Almighty. The climax came in 1910, when he secretly ran away from wife and home, contracted pneumonia on the train, and died in the stationmaster's office at the station in Astapovo—in biblical language: "*Zekher Tsaddik L'v'rokhoh*" ("The memory of the righteous is for blessing").

## Outline

**I.** Among Tolstoy's interests up until the 1880s was an interest in country life. He believed in physical labor but also in the benefits of agricultural machines to ease the lives of serfs.

- **A.** This theme is present in *Anna Karenina*.
- **B.** Tolstoy was also interested in the education of the peasantry and put his ideas into many articles.

**II.** In the 1880s, Tolstoy experienced a distinct change in his interests and in his writing. He even went so far as to denounce his previous writing as immoral and vainglorious.

- **A.** The true nature of art he redefined as a Russian expression very difficult to translate: *chut' chut'*, meaning something like "barely, barely," or "the wee bit." It was a kind of call for minimalism, the slightest, most sensitive effort to communicate an idea or a feeling.

**B.** In this later period, Tolstoy's two most impressive works were in the novella form, a kind of long short story, or short novel: the Russian word is *povest'*. It is a favorite form of the Russian masters, represented by many 19th-century Russian masterpieces, as we have already seen in Gogol's *Overcoat* and Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*.

**III.** In 1886, Tolstoy published *The Death of Ivan Il'ich*, a story that deals with one of the author's two main obsessions. In this case, it is the inevitability of death, no matter how hard we struggle against it.

**A.** The story juxtaposes, almost diagrammatically, the life and death of a seemingly comfortable St. Petersburg legal bureaucrat, whose death announcement is read in the beginning of the story by his colleagues and friends.

**B.** Their thoughts are all centered on what positions they may gain as a result of his absence, just as the widow's thoughts are all concentrated on how much money she can get from the government, a scheme that she has very cleverly and earnestly tried to work out.

**C.** No one, it seems, has been willing to concentrate on the topic so important to the author of the tale: What is the nature of death itself, and how is it connected to the life of the formerly living human being?

**D.** Tolstoy takes us back to the life and career of the title character: how he made himself respected through observance of all the conventions of his social class.

**1.** Everything was done in accordance with the expectations of a career and of a family whose real feelings and desires were always kept at arm's length.

**2.** We are reminded of Karenin's St. Petersburg, though bereft of the genuine life force and passion of an Anna Karenina.

**E.** Just as Ivan Il'ich seems to have solved his financial problems and to have established his ideal comfortable home with its beautiful furniture, he slips while setting up a curtain and falls with considerable force on his side.

**F.** The initially minor pain gradually takes on an intensity that can no longer be ignored, and Ivan must face the fact that he is dying. What Tolstoy describes, in agonizing and precise detail, is death by cancer.

**G.** Nothing is able to bring relief, most especially not the agents whom Tolstoy has held in contempt for his whole career: doctors and lawyers. None of them can face the fact of death; they hide behind jargon like "floating intestines" and "binary state pensions."

**H.** We can make comparisons with similar scenes in Tolstoy's other novels.

**I.** Ivan begins to understand a little bit about the nature of his life when he contemplates the classical example of the syllogism: "All men are mortal. Caius is a man; therefore, it must follow that Caius is mortal."

**1.** Ivan considers that all very well for Caius. Let him die if he so wishes. What does Caius know about Vanya's mama's dress with the rustle of its silken folds, about Vanya's love for tarts, his loves, his skills?

**2.** Here, we get a breath of the old mastery of Tolstoy in bringing our deepest feelings and fears, as well as pleasures, to light.

**J.** Through the worst pains of a drawn-out death, Tolstoy leads us mercilessly, yet with enough glimpses of compassion, to the final hours, when Ivan cries out desperately that he doesn't want it, death, to take over. In Russian, "I don't want" is *Ia ne khochu*, and Ivan becomes stuck on the final vowel, *uuuuu*, which he moans through the house so that no one can miss its sound.

**K.** At the very last minute, there was no fear, because in place of death, Ivan saw light and felt a certain kind of joy, and he could no longer find his former customary fear of death. For him, becoming dead meant that death no longer existed. In all of Tolstoy's many scenes of death, this was the closest he came to the kind of transcendence that he sought.

**IV.** The second great obsession with which Tolstoy continually struggled was the passion connected with physical sex.

**A.** In the case of Anna Karenina, as in the first unhappy marriage of Pierre Bezukhov, Tolstoy recognizes the depth and the power of lust.

**B.** There is a marvelous scene in *War and Peace*, in which Pierre Bezukhov proposes to La Belle Helène, the daughter of Prince Vasilii. Pierre knows that he is doing something wrong. His lust won't make a happy marriage, but he can't help himself. He can't

even remember to say, "I love you." The marriage is indeed unhappy.

**C.** A novella published in 1891, *The Kreutzer Sonata*, shows Tolstoy expressing his most ferocious views and feelings on the subject. This novella is, in some ways, very unpleasant reading, showing an older Tolstoy expressing deep disenchantment with marriage and even with physical love. Yet, at the same time, it is one of his most powerfully expressed works.

**D.** Interestingly, the narration of the story takes place in a railroad car.

**1.** Clearly, Tolstoy sees the railroad as a destructive force within Russia, a blindly onrushing machine that crushes human life and has none of the charm of the carriage, pulled by a horse, a living organism with a sense of smell and direction.

**2.** We saw this negative association not only in the self-destruction of Anna Karenina but also in the unsuccessful attempts of Oblonsky to get into the commercial direction of the newly established Russian railway companies.

**E.** The story opens under an epigraph taken from the book of Matthew. It is the famous warning by Jesus about anyone who looks upon a woman with longing: Such a person has already committed adultery in his heart.

**F.** The narrator, riding in the train, looks about him and cannot help but notice an especially nervous man with extraordinarily brilliant eyes. He resists almost all attempts to open conversation, but when the general discussion turns to a theme much discussed in Russia at that time, the position of women in society and the nature of love and marriage, the old man suddenly becomes extremely articulate.

**G.** It turns out that he is a man connected with a well-known scandal in Russia at that time: He murdered his wife. When other travelers in the railway car manage to leave his presence, he goes into a long, passionate recounting of the events and feelings leading to the murder.

**H.** He argues that the maintenance of conjugal love is impossible, that physical love between a man and a woman, even in marriage, can only lead to the worst kind of sin and degradation. When his interlocutor objects that such an extreme position against physical love could lead to the end of the human race, the passionate man

agrees and says that would be a good thing, long predicted by all religions and the discoveries of science.

**I.** He also argues paradoxically that women have domination over the world, simply because of the fact that men have all the rights. By acting on the passions of men, women subdue them and gain a terrible power over them. In this way, they exact vengeance for the submissive role that society has attempted to assign them.

**J.** He makes a curious analogy between the position of Jews and the position of women in Russia. Just as Jews, who are forced to be petty merchants, use their financial power to avenge their humiliation, so women use their position as objects of sensual desire to bring about the slavery of men.

**K.** In many other instances, Tolstoy showed considerable sympathy for the problems of Jews in tsarist Russia. Here, his character makes a statement about so-called Jewish financial power that one would ordinarily expect in anti-Semitic propaganda. One can explain this aspersion, it seems to me, by the extreme passions aroused in the character of the story.

**L.** The man's wife had been performing music in their house with a handsome young man who was also a fine musician. The husband describes the terrible passion expressed in Beethoven's *Kreutzer Sonata*. He describes so effectively how Beethoven's art transports the listener to another realm of consciousness that the reader can see how his wife was swept away by her passion for the young man.

**M.** It is only a matter of time before the husband discovers the real attraction between them, and Tolstoy describes in agonizing detail how the husband's knife enters his wife's flesh under the ribs. This description is all the more terrible when we realize that Tolstoy was dictating the story to his own wife.

**N.** In a sequel to the story, Tolstoy replies to the understandable dismay expressed by many of his readers. He reiterates, quite explicitly, that physical love is an unworthy object for men and women, even within the marriage bond.

**O.** Within this story, we see quite explicitly Tolstoy's position taken to the extreme: The end of the human race would not be a bad thing—it might well be an end to be desired. This message is a

hard one to take from the author who created the intense and loving world of *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina.*

**V.** Tolstoy lived out his remaining years in the last decade of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th. His household had become world famous and a place for widespread pilgrimage.

**A.** An event took place that was probably painful to Tolstoy and certainly to his family. He had published a novel called *Resurrection*. In it, he described a mass in an unspiritual way, which the Church found offensive. He was excommunicated.

**B.** In 1910, Tolstoy decided he could no longer bear his domestic situation. He quietly left the house one night, without informing his family, and set out on the road, presumably toward a monastery.

**C.** Tolstoy fell ill on the train that he took and was taken into the stationmaster's office at the city of Astapovo. He was mortally ill. After his death, the Church refused him burial in hallowed ground, as he was officially a heretic and had not confessed his sin.

**D.** His coffin rests in an ivy-covered knoll. He had specifically requested to be buried under a stick that he and his brother had found when they were children; they called it a stick of reconciliation and love.

**Suggested Reading:**

R. F. Christian, *Tolstoy: A Critical Introduction*.

Donna Tussing Orwin, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Tolstoy*.

**Questions to Consider:**

**1.** In *The Death of Ivan Il'ich*, Tolstoy talks about fear in the anticipation of death as contrasted with the appearance of light, without fear, in the actuality of death. Can this be compatible with the Christian idea of resurrection, or is Tolstoy talking about something totally connected with our living senses? Keep in mind that the author could not be buried in Church-hallowed ground.

**2.** In his examination of sexual lust in *The Kreutzer Sonata*, Tolstoy talks about women's terrible power, which they attain as a kind of sexual vengeance over men, who have taken away many of their rights. Would such an argument find agreement in the contemporary women's movement?

# Lecture Twenty-Two
# Ivan Sergeevich Turgenev, 1818–1883

**Scope:** Turgenev had both the pleasure and pain of being the contemporary of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. Although in his day Turgenev was generally considered the best of Russian prose writers, especially by his Western friends Gustave Flaubert, and Henry James, the Russian now tends to be depicted by a faintly concealed condescension, the poor relative of his more talented compatriots. This depiction is grossly unfair, as anyone who has read Turgenev's prose with half a heart can testify. Yet life itself seemed determined to put Turgenev down. He was once challenged by Tolstoy to a duel, and he was branded as a coward when he wisely avoided such a potential tragedy. Later, there was the famous reconciliation at Iasnaia Poliana, lasting until one of them lost a game of checkers! Dostoevsky never forgave Turgenev's kindness in lending money when Dostoevsky desperately needed it. Later, the religious writer savaged Turgenev as Karmazinov in the novel translated as *The Possessed*. Such are the literary rewards of liberal kindness!

## Outline

**I.** In almost all the Russian writers we have thus far examined, one of their outstanding characteristics was a strength of conviction, the notion that they had an idea or a theme of vital importance, which they would communicate directly, no matter what the consequences might be. In the case of Turgenev, we find a genuine contrast to this kind of extreme passion.

**A.** Turgenev, with the temperament of the true liberal, the man who found himself between the extremes of public opinion, often ended up in the middle of his society's polemics, attacked and even cursed by both sides or, even worse, praised for exactly the wrong reasons, or so it seemed to him.

**B.** He was born into a fairly wealthy landowner's family, in the old Russian province of Orel. His mother had the reputation of being a very harsh mistress over her serfs, not hesitating to order severe corporal punishment for the slightest infractions. Her son early

experienced a deep revulsion against such actions and felt estranged from his social background. All his life he would argue against human slavery.

**C.** At the same time, he well understood that his livelihood and material welfare depended to a large extent on the money brought in by the family estate.

**1.** His mother was well aware of both his attitude and his dependence. She attempted to use the income from the estate as a means of control over the actions and opinions of her son.

**2.** The result was, of course, as long as she lived, a very strained and unpleasant family situation. It is no accident that the strong characters in Turgenev's novels are women.

**D.** In the 1840s, he began to write a series of stories, ostensibly about his hunting expeditions in the Russian countryside. When they were collected and published together under the title *Notes of a Hunter*, it became clear that the stories portrayed the miserable situation of the Russian serfs, who were still languishing in slavery.

**E.** The book brought him considerable fame, and many people believe it played a significant role in preparing Russian public opinion for the Grand Emancipation of 1861, the legal and official end of serfdom in Russia.

**F.** Of course, Turgenev was then seen as an ally of those who wanted to reform tsarist Russia and move it in the direction of Western European parliamentary democracy.

**1.** There were also those who were more radical and wanted to see some form of socialism in Russia. Many of them looked upon Turgenev as a supporter.

**2.** By this time, Turgenev had inherited his family estate and could afford to give monetary assistance.

**G.** As his reputation continued to grow in the 1860s, Turgenev was seen by his friends and colleagues in the West, particularly Gustave Flaubert and Henry James, as the best of the Russian writers.

**1.** For at least a generation, Turgenev was the outstanding representative of Russian literature as Western readers understood it.

2. To his considerable credit, Turgenev tried hard in the West to popularize the works of his great Russian contemporaries, particularly Pushkin and Tolstoy.

**II.** His personal relationships with Russian writers were more complex and sometimes even stormy.

**A.** Dostoevsky initially admired Turgenev's work, but then Turgenev made the mistake of lending Dostoevsky money, which he desperately needed. This generosity triggered a hostile reaction against Turgenev, as Dostoevsky took it to mean that Turgenev looked down on him.

**B.** The result was a vicious satire of Turgenev in Dostoevsky's passionately anti-revolutionary novel *The Possessed.* In the midst of a text about diabolical and murderous political radicals, Turgenev appears lightly disguised under the name Karmazinov. He is pictured as a weak, fading writer, desperately pandering to the Russian radicals.

**C.** The situation was further aggravated by many ironic statements Turgenev made about the state of tsarist Russia and its backwardness. Dostoevsky found them deeply insulting.

**D.** Turgenev's relations with Tolstoy were not much easier. In a discussion between them, Tolstoy caused anger to flare by a deprecating remark about some charitable actions described by Turgenev. Hot words led to a challenge to a duel. Tolstoy agreed, on condition that the weapons be rifles, not pistols. Turgenev wisely managed to avoid the duel, and Tolstoy spread the word that his contemporary was a coward.

**E.** Some years later, when Tolstoy was already in his preaching mode, he wrote to Turgenev in France, requesting and urging a reconciliation. Turgenev agreed to a friendly visit at Tolstoy's estate. Rumor has it that the tearful reconciliation lasted until Turgenev was victorious in a game of checkers!

**F.** In defense of Turgenev, it can be said that later, in 1883, when he was on his deathbed, he wrote a deeply moving letter to Tolstoy, begging him to return his great talent to literature for the sake of Russia's welfare.

**III.** Unlike either Tolstoy or Dostoevsky, Turgenev's most impressive writing appears in his shorter works, where there is less need for the

development of character and where a strong feeling of a particular time and place can be emphasized.

**A.** One of his most impressive novellas came in 1860, with the publication of *First Love*.

**1.** It is an incredibly tender and beautiful evocation of adolescent passion, and it presents many of the themes and problems central to Turgenev's work and talent.

**2.** It is ostensibly written in nostalgic retrospect by the protagonist of the story in response to his friends' request to hear the story of his first love, which was "not exactly ordinary."

**B.** He starts off with the vaguely formed but deeply felt sensual stirrings of a bashful 16-year-old boy:

> *…obraz zhenshchiny, prizrak zhenskoi liubvi…ne voznikal opredelennymi ochertaniiami v moem ume no … tailos' polusoznannoe, stydlivoe predchuvstvie chego-to novogo neskazanno sladkogo, zhenskogo…*
>
> The image of a woman, the phantom of a woman's love…almost never came well shaped or formed into my spirit…but somewhere there was rising up a half recognized, guilty foreboding of something new, inexpressibly sweet, and feminine…

Seldom has the first stirring of sensual love been so well caught in literature.

**C.** At a time when these feelings are rising up in the heart of the youngster, who is still partly a boy and partly a man, he and his family move into a summer house near a famous Moscow park. Their new neighbors turn out to be the family of an impoverished princess, who has an imperious and very attractive 21-year-old daughter, Zinaida.

**D.** After the boy changes his name from the Russian Vladimir to the Polish Woldemar (which she thinks more romantic), Zinaida proceeds to make Vladimir a part of her subservient male company, rewarding him sometimes with tender kisses and sometimes with minor sadistic inflictions of sharp slaps and blows.

**E.** The young man's entire consciousness could not have been in greater bondage to her image than it was at that time of his life.

The nature of love becomes closely associated with a situation of total slavery—in this case, of the young man to the attractive young lady.

**F.** But the young man must also keep up relations with his parents in the summer. Particularly troublesome to him is his relationship—rather, the absence of a real relationship—with his father.

**1.** The older man knew how to be charming when he so wished, but he never tolerated consistently close communication with his son.

**2.** The young man does notice, however, that the father knows how to talk with Zinaida.

**G.** It becomes clear that Zinaida is increasingly bothered by some mysterious feeling; she even seems, for some reason, to be apologetic to the young man.

**H.** It soon turns out that a mysterious stranger, appearing before the young man's eyes as he is watching Zinaida's house at night, is none other than his father. The protagonist suddenly realizes that he and his father are enamored of the same young woman.

**I.** Such relations cannot be kept secret for long, and soon the mother learns, from a letter written by a jealous follower of Zinaida, about the unfaithfulness of the father.

**J.** During the ensuing chaos, the father takes the son on a horseback-riding expedition. In the midst of this episode, the son sees his father striking the arm of the beautiful Zinaida with his horsewhip. Her reaction is to kiss the welt caused by the blow.

**K.** Many years pass, and the protagonist, no longer a young man, thinks back on the episode, with the consciousness that he had been introduced to the nature of true love.

**IV.** In Turgenev's writing, the genuine power of will is almost always exercised by a woman. His male characters, or at least those who are Russian, are capable of wonderful, sometimes even powerful, speech. But when it comes time for action, something always goes amiss.

**A.** Turgenev wrote an essay called "Hamlet and Don Quixote," in which he saw people as combinations of both these personalities.

**B.** This duality is visible in *First Love* and would become a much stronger theme in *Fathers and Sons*, which deals with conflicts between generations.

**Suggested Reading:**

Leonard Schapiro, *Turgenev: His Life and Times*.

Ivan Turgenev, *First Love*.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. Why does a classical liberal like Turgenev, who only wanted to help Dostoevsky by lending him money when he badly needed it, end up bearing the lash of the powerful writer's anger and contempt?
2. How does Turgenev make the bashful 16-year-old boy in *First Love* bear the tender and universally recognized symptoms of early and fresh passion?

# Lecture Twenty-Three
# The Stresses between Two Generations

**Scope:** In addition to a series of extremely finely crafted short stories and novellas, Turgenev wrote several relatively short novels. One of them, *Fathers and Sons* of 1861, was destined to become one of Europe's defining moments in 19th-century prose. Both Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, as well as many Western writers, took the form and ideas of this novel as a basis for their own work. With his invention of the political word *nihilist*—one who wants to destroy all present institutions—Turgenev managed to touch the essence of the biblical question from Genesis 22:1–18, the story that relates Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his only son. Any binding (the Hebrew title *Akedah* means "binding") between generations requires not only accord but also friction that can even threaten to become mortal. It is the latter that we see in *Fathers and Sons*. Bazarov and the Kirsanov family become the modern characters in this universal drama.

## Outline

**I.** In Russia, the decade of the 1860s was an extraordinarily creative time for literary prose. The most outstanding prose artists of that time were clearly Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Turgenev. In no small way, they were all caught up in the themes of the polemics between generations and among the political and ideological groups, which each had their own programs for the future of their rapidly changing country.

**A.** The relatively open and liberal regime of Tsar Alexander II made it possible to debate many of these issues openly, and the Russian writers jumped into the fray with blazing polemical pens. Turgenev dealt with the great theme of the relationship between generations in his most famous novel, *Fathers and Sons*, which had extraordinary influence, most especially on Dostoevsky.

**B.** It is a theme that goes back to the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac. The Hebrew title of the story is *The Binding*, which implies both the idea of connection and the idea of rebellion. Written in 1861, *Fathers and Sons* straddles many of the most hotly debated

issues of the day, thereby calling down on Turgenev's head intense fire from all sides of the political spectrum.

**C.** The novel takes place in the countryside, on the estate of the Kirsanov family. We first observe the place through the eyes of Nikolai Kirsanov, who is excitedly awaiting the arrival of his son, Arkady, just coming back from student life at a large Russian university.

**1.** In the father's strong emotions, we experience not only the delight of a family reunion but also a certain trepidation.

**2.** After the death of his wife, Nikolai has entered into close relations with a young woman from the lower class, and the two of them already have a young child, a new and unexpected brother for Arkady.

**D.** The situation is made even more complicated by the fact that Arkady has brought a guest to the house, a young man named Bazarov. One of Turgenev's most famous characters, the young guest represents the new, radical thinking of a younger Russian generation, just coming out of the universities.

**E.** It does not take Bazarov long to let the older generation know, in a deliberately offensive tone, that he holds all of their most cherished convictions in deep contempt. He proudly adopts the title of *nihilist*, a word rather new to the ears of Nikolai and his brother, Pavel.

**F.** Near the beginning of the novel, the fathers and sons get into a passionate and heated argument about the perceived worth or, rather, the complete absence of worth in the most cherished convictions of the older generation.

**G.** Nikolai, and even more strongly his brother, Pavel, are proud of their liberal notions and proposals for reform in Russian society. It is, after all, very close to the time of emancipation for all of Russia's millions of serfs. Pavel defends the notion of aristocratic *noblesse oblige*, a well- defined, stable society in which cultured and beneficent aristocrats tend to the needs of their less fortunate countrymen.

**H.** Bazarov responds with unconcealed contempt for what he sees as aristocratic condescension and incomprehension toward the lower classes. He brushes aside their notions of social philanthropy,

proudly boasting that he understands the peasantry a thousand times better than any of them could possibly know.

**I.** Furthermore, he absolutely denies the presence of anything positive in Russian culture or society. All of it has to be destroyed, he believes, turned into *nihil*, or nothing. Only then can a better society be conceived. In order to do this, even Russian poetry must be destroyed. Only materialist science can offer ideas and concepts of value to Russian society.

**J.** In a way, this point of view reminds us of Turgenev's own statement, which infuriated Dostoevsky. At that time, there was a building in England called the Crystal Palace, which supposedly contained all of the useful inventions known to humankind. Turgenev said, rather sarcastically, that if that palace were to burn down, Russia would not have lost any of its own contributions. Such was the approach of Russian radicals toward their own national history.

**K.** Turgenev's novel expresses the extreme conclusions drawn by the nihilists. And Bazarov seems to be one of the strongest male characters drawn by Turgenev.

**II.** In contrast to the atmosphere of Bazarov's polemics against the older generation, Turgenev gives us a picture of Russian feminine society in the countryside of the 1860s. He compares a caricature of what the Russians would then have called a liberated woman with a female character who turns out to be the strongest figure in the novel.

**A.** When the two young men leave the Kirsanov Estate, they go to visit a woman named Evdoksiia Kukshina, described as a truly emancipated, progressive woman. She soon turns out to be the kind of person who scatters pronouncements and questions in the air, without the slightest intent of intelligent communication.

**B.** She dismisses the notions of almost all serious contemporary thinkers. All of this rejection is put forward in the name of materialism and progress.

**C.** Bazarov has sense enough to take her very lightly, in spite of her seemingly materialist views. But he does not hesitate, rather cynically, to take advantage of her hospitality, especially her good champagne.

**D.** The action at Kukshina's house is rather abruptly interrupted by the mention of another woman's name, Anna Odintsova. When Bazarov hears their description of this beautiful lady, he understands instinctively, almost immediately, that a very different person is in view. In spite of his extreme expressions of nihilism, he obviously has a genuine sensitivity for understanding people.

**E.** After the two young friends actually meet Odintsova, Bazarov responds to Arkady's question about the first impression made by the beautiful lady: what a delectable body—perfect for the dissecting table! Arkady expresses disgust, but the reader understands that something rather different is happening inside Bazarov, something that the nihilist finds uncomfortable.

**F.** When the two of them go to visit her estate, it soon becomes obvious that Odintsova's beauty and intelligence have entered deeply into Bazarov's imagination. The nihilist is nowhere nearly so consistent as his arrogantly ejaculated arguments would make the older generation believe. Furthermore, he is intelligent enough to realize the genuine strength and intelligence of the beautiful woman, who is obviously worthy of a far better position than a body on a dissecting table.

**G.** Bazarov eventually opens up to show his passion for Odintsova, but she, in spite of her attraction to his powerful personality, rejects his offer of closeness. She is not ready for the complexities of a genuinely intimate relationship.

**III.** At this point, Turgenev takes us to a still different version of the older generation: He shows us Bazarov's parents, an old-fashioned medical doctor with his wife, a warm-hearted, plump country lady who knows how to prepare and set a marvelous traditional Russian table. Turgenev describes the two of them with obvious attraction and delight.

**A.** The conversation between the two generations is quite different here from what it was at the Kirsanov estate.

**1.** Here, the older man is trying to convince his son, who also will practice as a medical doctor, about the efficacy of medicine in previous days.

**2.** Bazarov reacts with skepticism, but without any of the arrogance he displayed earlier. We understand that he respects what his father does, in spite of the nihilist's words toward medicine in general.

**B.** Furthermore, it is equally clear that the elder Bazarov has great respect for an earlier generation of Arkady's family, a general under whom the doctor had served. He brushes aside his son's attempt to dismiss that generation with nihilist talk.

**C.** Turgenev makes it clear in this scene that the work of the older generation cannot be simply dismissed, even in the context of a younger generation that wants to change everything in the world. The doctor has respect for the force and energy of the young people, but he also has a decent amount of self-respect.

**D.** The real literary fireworks are reserved for Bazarov's mother, a "genuine Russian woman of the old school," who might well have lived 200 years earlier. Her evening meal was incomparable, with all the flourishes of the old school of cooking.

**E.** She was full of the old Russian folklore, with all kinds of superstitions expressed in marvelously spontaneous and poetic ways. She knew the devil lurked in still water, so she washed her face only in running water; she wouldn't eat watermelon, because when cut in half, it reminded her of the head of John the Baptist.

**F.** As Turgenev interjects, such women are increasingly harder to find. God knows if that is a good or a bad thing. The reader certainly infers the positive side of this proposition.

**G.** It is indicative of her strong influence on the subconscious of her nihilist son that her presence causes him to lose a night's sleep thinking about Odintsova's recent rejection of his advance. The traditions that she embodies go very deeply into his character and the real character of the younger generation.

**H.** When the young people abruptly decide to leave the parents' house, it is Bazarov's mother who expresses what the older generation feels in losing its young people; it is also she who comforts her husband when he realizes how alone he feels in the parting with his son. Clearly, Turgenev has a deep association with the feelings of this old-fashioned Russian couple.

**IV.** Turgenev then plunges the reader into the internal contradictions of Bazarov's character. Although upholding the stubborn consistency of his own opinions, the young nihilist manages to antagonize and even threaten physically his close friend Arkady. When they return to the

Kirsanov Estate, he even manages to get involved with Fenya, the young mistress of Nikolai Kirsanov.

**A.** When Pavel, Nikolai's brother, who has had bitter arguments with Bazarov, notices how warmly Fenya reacts to Bazarov, he decides to take matters into his own hands. He will provoke the young man to an old-fashioned duel.

**B.** Bazarov realizes that the very idea of a duel is absurd to a man of his principles, but he is also determined not to let himself be insulted by these condescending aristocrats.

**C.** The result is a duel in which Bazarov wounds Pavel, then insists on dealing with the wound as a young medical doctor would. Pavel ends up wearing the bandage set by the person whose principles the older man hates, and Bazarov ends up by participating in the kind of behavior that his principles most deeply oppose.

**D.** The contradictions end only in the death, in some ways almost a suicide, of Bazarov. In the course of the medical practice that he decides to take up, he asks his father to cauterize a cut he received while performing an autopsy on the corpse of a peasant who had died of typhus.

**E.** The father grows pale at the realization that there is no way to prevent his son's infection with what was then the incurable disease of typhus. We are fated to watch the inevitable death of Bazarov, a death he could easily have avoided by following normal medical procedure at the autopsy.

**F.** In the midst of Bazarov's final illness, Odintsova appears, with a well-known German doctor in tow. There is nothing he can do, but we see in this scene Odintsova's strength in contrast to the physical downfall of Bazarov, together with the collapse of his dreams and plans. As always in Turgenev's work, the women turn out to be the strongest people in Russia.

**V.** At the end of the novel, the two old parents of Bazarov visit the grave of their son. Turgenev asks whether or not their prayers are futile, whether or not their totally devoted love has some power. He refers to a poem by Pushkin about *ravnodushnaia priroda* ("indifferent nature"), which blooms and fades without reference to our human feelings.

**A.** He draws the conclusion that the flowers over the grave look at us with innocent eyes, which see not only the indifference of nature but also the possibility of reconciliation and eternal life.

**B.** Turgenev's own reconciliation with Russia, whose regime and flaws he often castigated mercilessly, is expressed in a famous prose poem, in which he says that it is impossible to believe that the magnificent and powerful Russian language was not given to a great people.

**Suggested Reading:**

V. S. Pritchett, *The Gentle Barbarian: The Life and Work of Turgenev*.

Ivan Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons (A Norton Critical Edition)*, edited and translated by Ralph Matlaw, collected critical articles at the end of the Norton Critical Edition.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. Bazarov, the nihilist, always seems to get the better of the argument in his dialogues with Pavel Kirsanov, the elder aristocrat in Turgenev's novel. Is there nothing to be said for the defender of the best parts of our cultural traditions, represented by the aristocratic slogan *noblesse oblige*?
2. When Bazarov's old parents grieve at his graveside, Turgenev quotes Pushkin's famous line about "indifferent nature." Does nature, as depicted in this novel, truly turn out to be indifferent to human suffering and aspiration?

# Lecture Twenty-Four
# Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, 1860–1904

**Scope:** In the 1890s, we come to the end of what is generally called the Golden Age of Russian Literature. To be sure, the art of Chekhov is hardly, or only slightly, below the level of the writers we have already considered. If you enter the American or British world of theater, you will soon find that Chekhov is its god. Although he is famous for some outstanding short stories, *The Darling*, *Grief*, *The Lady with the Pet Dog*, which convey deep human feelings in a very economical, brief way, his plays form a kind of bedrock for the modern theater as we know it. Such plays include his early *Seagull*, an initial failure on the St. Petersburg stage but a success in the hands of Stanislavsky, the dynamo of the world-famous Moscow Art Theatre, and *The Cherry Orchard*, a clear reference to a new order coming to Russia in the 20th century. These dramatic works, in a very quiet and restrained way, define a universe of human feelings that we barely know we possess yet recognize immediately when we see them in Chekhov's theatrical art. There is one more scene that he might have written, had his hand still been in working order: It would have been that of the train car, labeled "fresh oysters," bearing him in his coffin.

## Outline

**I.** In the years following 1883, which saw the death of Turgenev, the so-called Golden Era of Russian Literature came to an end. Starting with Pushkin, near the beginning of the 19th century, it continued to about the middle of the 1880s.

**A.** Near the end of that decade, some new tendencies took hold among both Russian critics and writers, and there arose a kind of divide between those who remained attached to the earlier way of writing, often called "Realism"—although that is probably an oversimplified description of a rich and varied corpus of works—and those who sought new ways of understanding experience and its representation in literature.

**B.** The latter often called themselves "Decadents," or "Symbolists," to indicate that they were shoving aside the old polemics around

large civic and philosophical themes. Instead, they wanted to explore a world that lay hidden somewhere beneath or beyond ordinary consciousness.

**C.** This period of Russian literary polemics, known as the Silver Age, involved representatives of all the arts, whose influence reached across Europe.

**D.** In the earlier period of these polemics, from the late 1880s up to his death in 1904, Anton Chekhov occupied a literary position not far from the traditionalists, yet his prose and drama opened new ways of thinking about theater and the art of the short story.

**II.** Chekhov was born into a family that had known slavery intimately. His grandfather had been a serf. The writer openly stated that he had to squeeze the slavery out of his blood slowly, deliberately, drop by drop.

**A.** He was educated as a doctor, and he practiced medicine for a good part of his life. In his approach to his characters, it is not hard to see the detached and observant eye of the medical examiner.

**B.** In an early part of his life, while still in medical school, he wrote light, humorous stories under the pseudonym of Chekhonte. He did so mainly to support his needy brothers and sisters.

**C.** When he had achieved a certain popularity among the reading public, he started to write stories of greater substance and developed into the Chekhov known throughout the world today. In the West, especially in England and the United States, his greatest reputation is that of a playwright. It probably would not be an exaggeration to call him the icon, if not the god, of the modern international theater.

**III.** As early as the 1880s, Chekhov had tried his hand at writing plays, but they did not become widely known. In 1895, he set to work on *The Seagull*, which became one of the best-known plays of its time and a formative drama of 20th-century theater.

**A.** *The Seagull*'s first performance in a traditional St. Petersburg theater in late 1895 was a huge flop. Chekhov was mercilessly raked over the coals by the well-known critics of the day, and the sensitive writer swore he would never write for the theater again.

**B.** Then he was visited by Danchenko, one of the founders of the Moscow Art Theatre, a new institution at that time, with its

director, whose pseudonym, now internationally famous, was Stanislavsky. The rest is well-known theatrical history.

1. Danchenko eventually persuaded Chekhov to let the young group perform *The Seagull*, and the new presentation captured the rapturous attention of the theater public, first in Russia, then around the world.
2. Today, the curtain of the Moscow Art Theatre is decorated with one symbol: a seagull.

**C.** The plot of *The Seagull* is intensely connected with the theater, as well as the nature of the literary artist. One of its central characters is Trepliov, a young, ambitious playwright.

1. He has written a play very much in the spirit of the new young writers at that time, who wanted a radical change in literary art, in tune with the ideology of the Symbolists and Decadents. He is on fire with new ideas.
2. His fire also extends to Nina, the young woman who will perform his monodrama. Trepliov is passionately in love with her.

**D.** The opening of *The Seagull*, so typical for Chekhov, is a dialogue between a poor schoolteacher and the daughter of an estate manager.

1. The daughter is dressed in black to indicate mourning for her life.
2. The teacher claims not to be mourning his fate, which seems bitter enough—23 rubles a month to support a large family and a desperate love for her that she rejects in the beginning.

**E.** Of course, Trepliov's high hopes and ambitions are far removed from the mundane desires of the underpaid teacher and the estate manager's daughter. Yet the frustrations that each will encounter— will put them in the same Chekhovian universe of people who often talk past each other and must live their lives with great pain and minimal gratification.

1. His play will be a miserable flop, and the young actress will seek union with another writer.
2. The poor schoolteacher will fall into a loveless marriage with the woman who continues to mourn for her life and who nurses a secret love for the doctor in the play.

**F.** Chekhov calls his play a comedy. Given the high level of frustration and pain experienced by the characters, it is often hard for audiences to understand why. Certainly, Stanislavsky, the famous director, did not stage the play in a comic way. We have many statements from Chekhov himself complaining that Stanislavsky misunderstood the author's comic intent.

**G.** I suspect that Chekhov's notion of the comic is connected with his view as a medical observer who must remain at some emotional distance in order to understand the ailments of the patient. When one looks at human affairs from this vantage point, they can seem comic and more than a bit absurd. Such a view is very close to the one taken by Doctor Dorn, who is a character in the play.

**IV.** We see the theater from a very different point of view when we see the older generation in *The Seagull*.

**A.** Madame Arkadina, an actress with a wide reputation in the Russian theater, is the mother of Trepliov. Her affections are bound up with another writer, Trigorin, Chekhov's portrait of a popular writer at that time.

**1.** Arkadina has precious little sympathy for her son and is energetic and public in her denunciation of his play and denial of his talent.

**2.** Trepliov is even more deeply hurt by his mother's attraction to Trigorin, a traditional writer who has achieved the kind of popularity and recognition that Trepliov can only envy.

**B.** Madame Arkadina expresses genuine regret for her previous actions and manages to show real feeling for her son, but this regret does not last for more than a moment.

**C.** Matters become even worse when it turns out that Nina, the young actress in Trepliov's earlier play, has fallen madly in love with Trigorin. She throws herself at him, and he willingly uses her, enjoying her love, then throwing her over.

**D.** Near the end of the play, Nina comes back to visit Trepliov. She compares herself to the seagull, which he had previously shot and stuffed. When she flees from his attempted embrace, we realize that she will never return.

**E.** The famous end of the play strikes with a force built up by Chekhov's restraint. We hear a shot ring out behind the scene, and

the doctor quietly takes Trigorin aside and urges him to take Madame Arkadina away; her son has just shot himself.

**F.** Although hardly a comedy, as Chekhov described it, *The Seagull* is an extraordinarily moving play.

**V.** In his short stories, Chekhov shows a similar ability to present human feeling in a special way. A good example is a story whose title is usually translated as "The Darling." In Russian, it is "Dushechka," which literally means "little soul" and is often used as a term of endearment.

**A.** Readers have taken the title to refer to the famous Greek legend of Psyche, whose name is the Greek word for "soul." This tale has often been interpreted as a representation of the dangers in combining the force of eros with the force of the soul.

**B.** In Chekhov's tale, a lady named Olga is first presented as the wife of a theater manager, who is eternally nervous about getting sufficient audiences to support his enterprise. Her every thought is devoted to the theater, and kindness and sweetness cause everyone to call her *dushechka*.

**C.** Unfortunately, the theater manager dies, but Olga is soon courted by and then married to a lumber merchant. Now, suddenly, the theater seems to her a senseless interest. The only important things in the world are the details connected with the manufacture and sale of lumber. And everyone calls her *dushechka*.

**D.** Unfortunately, the lumber merchant dies, but Olga now takes up with a veterinarian, and soon she is talking about the diseases of animals and their problems. And everyone calls her *dushechka*.

**E.** Then, the veterinarian leaves her, and she loses all interest in life. She has no opinions whatsoever—one can understand how painful this is! People no longer call her *dushechka*.

**F.** Happily, the veterinarian returns, this time with his wife and child. She rejoices, puts them up in a wing of her house, and takes over the care of the child, with all the attendant worries and problems. Once more, people call her *dushechka*. And, at the end of the story, we hear the stirring of the child in his sleep, as Olga expresses her concern about him.

**G.** Tolstoy interpreted this story as a retelling of the biblical tale of Balaam, the priest of a people who stood in the way of Israel on its journey out of Egypt.

**1.** When Balaam was called upon to pronounce a curse on the people of Israel, he tried three times, but each time, there came out of his mouth a blessing, instead of the intended curse.

**2.** He sadly realized that it was impossible to curse those whom God had blessed.

**H.** Tolstoy said that Chekhov, in this story, was like Balaam. He had intended to make Olga a comic character, with her light-minded adoption of different professions, but the result was only a demonstration of the power of love: She became *dushechka* only when she was deeply in love with another person, and the power of that all-giving love was the highest mark of humanity.

**Suggested Reading:**

Anton Chekhov, "The Darling," in *The Portable Chekhov*, with an introduction by Avrahm Yarmolinsky.

Anton Chekhov, *The Seagull*, in *Plays*, translated and edited by Eugene Bristow, Norton Critical Edition.

Paul Debreczeny and Thomas Eekman, eds., *Chekhov's Art of Writing: A Collection of Critical Essays*.

J. L. Styan, *Chekhov in Performance*.

**Questions to Consider:**

**1.** In presenting Trepliov's modernistic play, Chekhov is obviously drawing a satirically exaggerated picture. Yet is there some hint of sympathy with the style, which was new at that time? Does this affect the picture Chekhov draws of Mme. Arkadina's family, especially her ambivalent reactions to her son, Trepliov, and, in turn, his relations with the young would-be actress, Nina?

**2.** Is Olga, the central character in "The Darling," a comically drawn character? If so, how does our laughter fit in with whatever sympathies we may have for her and, perhaps, for her various husbands?

# Lecture Twenty-Five
# M. Gorky (Aleksei M. Peshkov), 1868–1936

**Scope:** Gorky's real name means "pawn"; his pseudonym means "bitter." In those two words, we have the essence of this remarkable personality, who had real talent, which he sometimes, but not always, revealed in writing that shook Russia and the world. For several years in the early 20th century, he even eclipsed the fame of Tolstoy. Destined to live on the chronological edge between two political and social systems, which were separated by two revolutions and a bloody civil war, he became a symbol of that change, ending his career as a kind of Soviet icon. Of course, he was no saint, and wide propagandistic worship only served to conceal the reality of his life and work. It also meant that he was extravagantly praised by some and equally extravagantly reviled by others. His appearance in New York City in 1906 resulted in a scandal that drove away Mark Twain, who had been the head of a committee formed to welcome Gorky to the land of the free and the home of the brave. Let's examine the reality, briefly, but as objectively as we can. I believe we will find both literary art and human decency well worth our effort and attention.

## Outline

**I.** Gorky was born into an artisan family. His real name was Peshkov. He later adopted his grandfather's pseudonym of Gorky. Gorky's father, Maksim, married into the Kashirin family, which had a dye shop in Nizhnii Novgorod.

**A.** Gorky's father was proud to be a Peshkov and not a Kashirin, a family he considered vulgar and materialistic.

**B.** Maksim eloped with Gorky's mother and sailed down the Volga River to Astrakhan, almost 1,000 miles away. In that colorful, ethnically mixed city, the father died of cholera, which he caught from his two-year-old son, who then recovered from the disease. His mother could never be warm to him, because she held him responsible for the death of his father.

**C.** The young child was then brought back up the Volga River to Nizhnii Novgorod, where most of the family disliked him as the offspring of a man who had fled the family business.

**D.** The one exception in the household who treated him kindly was his grandmother, Akulina, whom he remembered with an intense warmth. Typical for women of her class at that time, she was illiterate. But she evidently had a colossal memory and managed to remember thousands of lines from Russian folk poetry, which she recited with such feeling and talent that she held the passengers of the Volga ship mesmerized for almost a month during the trip back from Astrakhan to Nizhnii Novgorod. Her natural talent was at least as powerful as that of her grandson, who later acquired a worldwide reputation as an author.

**E.** Gorky left the household at an early age and made his way through many jobs in many places; he acquired a wide acquaintance of the people, towns, and villages across the vast territory of European Russia.

**F.** He first attracted a wide reputation in the 1890s as a writer of short stories about the Russian *bosiaki* ("the barefooted people"), who wandered about the land and exhibited, at least in Gorky's stories, a fierce sense of individual independence and strong will.

**G.** Lev Tolstoy himself made the statement that Gorky made the reader feel the spirit of the ordinary Russian people in a way that no other author, including himself, had been able to do.

**H.** Then, in 1902, Stanislavsky produced one of Gorky's plays, usually translated as *The Lower Depths* (literally, in Russian, "on the bottom"). The play deals with the theme of life-giving illusion, as opposed to the death-dealing reality of life. In American literature, Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* is taken directly from Gorky's famous play.

**I.** The theatrical technique of the Moscow Art Theatre was so powerful and impressive that Gorky quickly acquired an international reputation, which for several years, even rivaled the fame of Lev Tolstoy himself.

**II.** With his ever-growing reputation and with the public recognition that he had come from a lower part of Russian society, not previously represented in Russian literature, it was not surprising that Gorky

attracted the attention of the radical revolutionaries, at a time when the Russian Marxists split into two factions and Lenin was recognized as the head of the Bolsheviks (literally, "the people of the majority"). A strong personal relationship soon developed between the political leader and the author.

**A.** In 1906, after the abortive revolutionary attempt to seize power a year earlier, Gorky came to the United States, at the instruction of Lenin, to raise funds for the Russian revolutionaries. Such was the sympathy among many Americans for those they saw as Russian democratic reformers that Mark Twain himself headed a committee to meet and talk with the famous Russian writer.

**B.** The tsarist diplomats in Washington, desperate to head off the momentum of the project, circulated among the New York newspapers the fact that Gorky was traveling with his common-law wife, an actress from the Moscow Art Theatre.

**C.** Because Gorky had signed an exclusive agreement with the Hearst newspapers, the other papers gleefully spread the news that the Russian radical had come to destroy the famously high moral level of family life in New York at that time.

**D.** Gorky and his woman friend were expelled from the hotel late at night. Mark Twain ran away from the situation as fast as he could. The young Columbia University professor John Dewey, later one of our most eminent philosophers, took in the couple.

**E.** It was not one of the outstandingly noble moments in American literary history. Gorky did manage to speak before some socialist groups at the time, but his notions about American democracy and public decency were not very high.

**F.** He settled on the Italian island Capri, where he lived until an amnesty in 1913 allowed him to return to Russia. During those years, there were many polemics among the revolutionaries in exile, and Gorky played the role of a maverick, whom Lenin found not very easy to control.

**III.** Shortly after this time, Gorky produced some of his best writing. He wrote a series of autobiographical sketches, which in their collected form, gave a powerful picture of his own development as a writer, as well as a moving account of the 19th-century Russia that he knew. His

use of the language, both at its literary level and at the level of contemporary speech, was superb.

**A.** His account of Akulina, the loving grandmother, is extremely moving. It was she who taught him the possibilities of grace and love. Her plain, old body seemed to him supple and harmonious, and her kindness seemed to flow directly out of a soul that embodied the beauty of the faith in the Christian Madonna.

**B.** Akulina also introduced him to the beauties of Russian folk poetry, with recitations that astounded all who heard her. She well knew the reaction in folklore to stubborn people like her grandson:

> *Sunuli ego v adskoe plamia,*
> *Ladno-li Evstigneiushka s nami…*
> *Guby u nego spesivo naduty,*
> *A-ugarno, govorit, u vas v adu-to.*
>
> They stuck him into hell's flames:
> Well, Evstigneiushka, how do you like it in our place?...
> He pursed his lips arrogantly (hands on his hips).
> Well, it's pretty smoky at your place in hell.

**C.** The most powerful figure in the sketches is the grandfather. His God was the vengeful master of certain parts from the Bible. The whip with which he beat his grandson had a sting the young man never forgot.

**D.** It took strength to overcome the punitive force of the old man and imaginative leaps of faith to hear the stories about grandpa's earlier days as a Volga boatman, attached by a rope to the heavy barges, while others played the role of human dray horses. These childhood experiences played a large role in the formation of the writer's own imagination and narrative force.

**E.** There is an unforgettable moment when the young man, already an adolescent, returns to the Kashirin household. He suddenly butts his grandfather in the stomach, to which action the old man replies: "*Chto, koziol, opiat' bodat'sia prishol? Ekh, ty razboinik, ves' v otsa, Farmazon…Bonapart tsena kopeika!*" ("Well, you goat, have you come again to butt me? Ekh, you bandit, just like your father! Free Mason …Bonapart, the price of a kopeck!")

**F.** It would be hard to find a better representation of the rhythm of Russian speech than in the mouth of the man who, entirely unwittingly, prepared his grandson to produce some of the best Russian writing of the 20th century.

**IV.** The autobiographical and memoir forms gave Gorky a literary stance that worked extremely well for him. Through his "I," we can see powerfully animated characters. The fact that he always holds himself to be noble and correct, a somewhat unbelievable proposition, does not get in the way of his portrayal of others, who come to life in a very special way.

**A.** Such a portrayal is particularly impressive in his memoirs of Lev Tolstoy, whom he presents as a human being, rather than as a literary giant. Of course, his admiration for the man's genius is there, but it is kept behind a kind of curtain erected by the picture of the man, with all of his foibles.

**B.** Tolstoy had tended to regard Gorky as a representative of the Russian people, which the younger man somewhat resented, because he felt treated as a category, rather than as an individual human being.

**C.** Consequently, we get some glimpses of the very powerful and creative Tolstoy, who holds cards in his hands like a bird and who talks about God as if he and the deity were two bears in the same den!

**D.** We also get a view of the crotchety old man who could be banal and dismissive.

**E.** The memoir comes off as one of the best pictures we have of Tolstoy as a human being. And its force is typical of many memoirs by Gorky. In spite of some of his own tendentiousness as a writer, he gives a lively picture of Russia on the verge of revolution.

**F.** Gorky also wrote some beautiful memoirs of Chekhov, who cautioned him to learn the art of restraint, advice that Gorky resented.

**Suggested Reading:**

Maxim Gorky, *Autobiography of Maxim Gorky,* translated by Isidor Schneider.

Edward Wasiolek, ed., "Gorky's Memoirs of Lev Tolstoy," in *Critical Essays on Tolstoy*.

Irwin Weil, *M. Gorky: His Literary Development and Influence on Soviet Intellectual Life*.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. One of Gorky's most powerful portrayals was that of his loving grandmother, Akulina. His grandfather had a much different, far crueler character. In what way does his presentation of the grandfather illuminate both the author and his grandmother more fully?
2. The Tolstoy whom we see through Gorky's memoirs is a very special presentation of the older writer. How do Gorky's own ambivalent feelings play into the flowing personal picture of Tolstoy?

# Lecture Twenty-Six
# Literature and Revolution

**Scope:** During the First World War, two revolutions took place in what had been the tsarist empire of Russia. The first, in February–March 1917, overthrew Tsar Nikolai II and attempted to establish a democratic government. The second, under V. I. Lenin and his Bolsheviks in October–November 1917, overthrew the provisional democracy and sought to establish a dictatorship of the proletariat. In 1923, the name Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was adopted, which lasted until 1991. The new government was determined to put into practice the doctrine of Marxism, which meant that its leaders had to direct and control every aspect of human life toward the goal of a perfect society, labeled "complete communism." Naturally, Russian literature, long concerned with the "eternal questions," became a prime target and concern of such a regime. Gorky, in spite of his initial shock at the violence connected with the revolution, stayed loyal to the revolutionary cause. At times, though, he tried to protect writers and intellectuals from the excesses of Communist Party control.

## Outline

**I.** The tsar's attempt to fight the Japanese in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905 ended in a humiliating Russian defeat. In 1905, revolutionary parties briefly tried to set up authority in St. Petersburg and Moscow. Soon afterward, the tsar issued a somewhat liberalizing manifesto, which at least attempted to increase the role of the parliament (Duma).

**A.** In 1914, Russia entered World War I, suffering staggeringly huge losses of life. By 1917, the Russian home front was disintegrating, and the democratic parties forced the tsar to abdicate.

**B.** Some seven months later, Lenin and his Bolsheviks forced the Duma out and set up their own power in the name of another ruling body, the Soviet.

**1.** They negotiated a treaty with Germany, ceding large parts of what had been the western provinces of the empire.

2. They also had to fight a civil war against a wide range of internal opponents, often called Whites, and they had to face an invasion by the Polish army.

C. In the early 1920s, a new government was established, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).

II. Gorky was destined to play a prominent and important role in this process, although its twists and turns surprised him as much as they surprised the world looking on.

A. Gorky was shocked by the amount of violence and killing connected with the establishment of the new Bolshevik regime, and he wrote a famous series of newspaper attacks on what he and many other writers and intellectuals considered the totalitarian actions taken by Lenin and his followers.

B. Lenin tolerated this response for several months, possibly out of gratitude for Gorky's consistent and substantial pre-revolutionary support.

C. Eventually, Lenin closed the newspaper. Gorky then created and sponsored a world literature organization to attract the best translators in Russia. The plan was to create high-quality translations of the classics of world literature, to be made available at low cost for the population of the USSR.

D. Gorky also repeatedly exploited his close relationship with Lenin on behalf of writers and intellectuals who found themselves in trouble with the repressive and often violent new government agencies of control.

E. It was his unsuccessful attempt to save the life of a fine poet, Gumilev, that precipitated his departure from the USSR in 1922. Gorky spent a large part of his exile in Italy. Lenin was not entirely unhappy to see him go.

F. In l927, three years after Lenin's death, Stalin was already consolidating his power, and his agents persuaded Gorky to return to a changed homeland, where he enjoyed a massively organized celebration in his honor.

III. By this time, Gorky was deeply involved in the intense political and social struggles connected with Soviet control and direction of culture, made even more complicated by a host of political and personal intrigues among writers.

**A.** A whole series of new organizations came to life, each one promising to create and promote an entirely new kind of literature, reflecting the new style and psychology of an entity called, rather pompously, "the new Soviet man." The popular phrase arose as a Marxist *tabula rasa*, that is, a wax tablet scraped completely free of its previous form and shape.

**B.** It is not hard to understand that these new phrases included a great deal of nonsense. But many artists at the time thought the struggles might open the road to a new and perhaps more exciting kind of art, music, and literature.

**C.** From the Bolshevik viewpoint, these people who wanted an entirely new literature made unreliable allies. The culturally conservative Bolshevists turned to Gorky, a traditional supporter of their government who believed in traditional literature.

**D.** His idea of revolution meant making traditional writers, whose works had previously belonged to a small, privileged elite segment of the Russian population, the beloved personal property of the common people. The idea of the revolution, as Gorky saw it, was to raise their cultural level to the same height as that of the former Russian aristocracy.

**E.** This attitude put Gorky at odds with some of the most revolutionary figures in artistic circles at that time. Some Soviet critics went so far as to consider him ideologically unsound and even counter-revolutionary. These charges were not to be taken lightly in the atmosphere of that period.

**F.** As long as Gorky remained in Italy, the radical writers could sneer at him, tucked away in his comfortable villa near the shores of the gentle Mediterranean, far from the cold of the Russian winter and the blast-furnace heat of literary polemics amidst Bolshevik politics.

**G.** After Gorky returned to the Soviet Union and clearly became the subject of government-sponsored adulation, it became much harder in the USSR to attack him or his ideas.

**IV.** Stalin's governmental apparatus came up with a new plan to direct Soviet literature.

**A.** No longer would artists and writers be allowed to group and regroup themselves into unseemly bands of squabbling and

cacophonous ideologists. Instead, they would all be gathered together within an organization formed and tended by the state.

**B.** The administrators of this behemoth would see to it that the writers were inspired by love for the collective ideals of socialism and united by their loyalty (or at least the expression thereof) to the all-seeing and all-caring Soviet state.

**C.** From Stalin's point of view, the logical person to be the protagonist of the new organization was Gorky, a writer whose prestige came from pre-revolutionary times and lent itself also to the twists and turns of the Soviet epoch.

**D.** Gorky, after his return to the USSR, had hoped that his position under Stalin would be similar to what it was under Lenin in the early days of the revolution, before 1922. He was soon disillusioned.

**E.** But in the early 1930s, he thought he saw a chance to put Soviet literature on what he thought was the right track. The new organization would be called the Soviet Writers' Union. It would command considerable state funds, which would be awarded generously to those writers who would follow the state line.

**V.** That new line was soon designated as *socialist realism*.

**A.** What Gorky had in mind was the use of the best kind of realist prose produced in 19th-century France and Russia. He was thinking of Balzac and Tolstoy. But instead of an attack on the weaknesses of bourgeois society, it would praise the energies devoted to the creation of a socialist society.

**B.** Hardly a formula for producing exciting reading, this approach often was satirized by a deliberate misuse of the old Hollywood slogan: "Boy meets tractor; boy falls in love with tractor; boy marries tractor."

**C.** In spite of Gorky's high-minded intentions—he emotionally stated that he was not seeking to control what writers would say—this union and its ideology turned out to produce some of the most somniferous reading ever to hit the bookshelves of a not very eager reading world.

**D.** As Stalin consolidated his power ever more tightly in the 1930s, Gorky's own position became more and more untenable. Praised in official terms exaggerated to the point of nausea, he was seen in

the most unflattering way by those who understood anything about real literature, especially by his old friends.

**E.** Increasingly isolated in luxurious surroundings provided and controlled by the state organs of security, he died in 1936 under conditions that seemed ambiguous at best.

**F.** The Soviet Union soon proclaimed that he had been killed by fascist agents. Many people thought he had been killed by Stalin's agents. There is good evidence that he died a natural death, at least partly resulting from his depression, brought on by the circumstances of his life under Stalinist control.

**G.** Shortly after his death, the Soviet government began the dreadful Stalinist purges, which swept up millions of innocent people into forced labor camps and to sentences of death by firing squad.

**VI.** Gorky's name is often seen in a negative light, which overlooks his achievements, including his efforts to protect writers, even in Stalinist times, and to preserve the possibility of Russian culture in the 1920s.

**Suggested Reading:**

Alexander Kaun, *Maxim Gorky and His Russia*.

Lev Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*.

**Questions to Consider:**

**1.** In response to Gorky's ideas of creating a mass audience that would be literate and well-read in the classics, some people said that such a project would only lower the general cultural level, because most people are incapable of appreciating the best of world literature. What are the elements of good literary education that would alleviate such a problem? Would a socialist government be able to bring about such an education?

**2.** Medieval writers managed to produce a lively literature in describing the lives of the saints. Why would socialist writers not be able to produce an analogous body of literature that one could call *The Lives of the Socialist Saints*?

# Lecture Twenty-Seven
# The Tribune—Vladimir Maiakovsky, 1893–1930

**Scope:** To create the literature of the new—and of the soon-to-be spotless— world of socialism, which would prepare the way eventually for complete communism, Maiakovsky joined in the new organization called Proletarian Culture (*Proletkul't*). This organization was to include genuine workers, who could write with a new proletarian class consciousness. Alas, despite their consciousness, their writing was abominable. Maiakovsky, on the other hand, had a brilliant poetic talent, and his verse became an important part of the work that the Soviet government presented to the world as proof of the creative force of socialism. His evocation of the Sun to visit the proletarian poet, his cry for a creative surge from 'the army of the arts," even his paeon to the futuristic (albeit bourgeois) architecture of the Brooklyn Bridge, all stoked the fires of passionate socialism. This view was quite a contrast with Gorky's attachment to the best of world culture that had existed before the revolution.

## Outline

**I.** Vladimir Maiakovsky was one of the most interesting Russian writers of the 20th century, a genuine master of all levels of the Russian language.

**A.** Maiakovsky proudly called himself both a futurist and a tribune of the Bolshevik Revolution and the Soviet regime. It was he who articulated the phrase about throwing Pushkin, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy overboard from the steamer of modernity. Yet some of his best poetic lines made use of the Old Church Slavic language and religious imagery taken from ancient sources. He burned with the genuine fire of political passion, and his works aroused genuine passion, not stifled yawns, in his readers.

**B.** In his early years, Maiakovsky loved to engage in extreme and outrageous behavior at public gatherings, where he might bawl out his poetry or simply use profane and pornographic language intended to shock the bourgeoisie.

**C.** He soon acquired a reputation for his poetry not only among the radicals of his day but also among established poets and intellectuals. There was something marvelously unpredictable in his every move, and his powerful use of the language made a strong impression.

**D.** In October of 1917, Maiakovsky was more than ready to dedicate his talent and poetry to the Bolshevik Revolution and the new state.

**II.** In the early years of the Bolshevik regime, from 1918 to 1922, often described as "war communism," there was an attempt to change the whole structure of the former Russian state and society, much in the spirit of the *tabula rasa*.

**A.** Old economic organizations were crushed, and anyone who had experience in administering an estate or an enterprise was stripped of his or her position and, not infrequently, of life itself. "Topsy-turvy" might well have been the slogan of the day.

**B.** It was hardly surprising that such a policy led to a catastrophic decline of living standards, to mass undernourishment and even starvation, and to a significant increase in mortality during the cold Russian winter months, resulting from a terrible shortage of coal and heating fuel.

**III.** It was in this context that Maiakovsky wrote "Order No. 2 to the Army of the Arts."

**A.** The very fact that he uses the word *army* to refer to people who are presumably his fellow artists tells us his notions about the organization of creative endeavor under the new regime.

**B.** He then refers to the various groups who have been striving to create different styles in poetry and literature—futurists (Maiakovsky was considered one), imagists, and acmeists—all of them enmeshed in a spider web of rhymes. Maiakovsky seems to think they have achieved nothing of real worth.

**C.** He then turns to those who have taken on the title of proletarians in culture, whom he accuses of being satisfied to sew patches on an old- fashioned coat, worn out by Pushkin.

**D.** All of these people, plus the careerists and the romantics, are warned:

*Bros'te,*
*zabud'te,*
*Pliun'te.*
*I na rifmy,*
*I na arii,*
*I na rozovyi kust,*
*I na prochie melekhliundii*
*Iz arsenalov iskusstv.*

Throw it off,
Forget about it,
Spit on it—
On the rhymes,
On the arias,
And on the rosebush,
And on all the other phony moaning
From the storehouse of the arts.

**E.** He then proceeds to warn them: If you do not do what I say, they will come at you with rifle butts. Maiakovsky does not mince words; he spares neither his rivals nor the description of painful punishment awaiting them if they refuse to follow orders.

**F.** And why is his program for the art necessary to the young regime? He gives a bleak picture of a country where the locomotives groan for lack of coal and oil and for the absence of technicians and mechanics. He demands an art that will "*vyvoloch' respubliku iz griazi*" ("yank the republic out of the muck").

**G.** Such is the way Maiakovsky saw his country in the hands of a revolution for which he had yearned and fought. He could not deny that the nation was sunk in a terrible mess, and he cried out to the artists to help save it, in disciplined ranks very similar to the military.

**IV.** The tone is quite different from a famous poem that Maiakovsky had composed only a year earlier, in 1920: "An Extraordinary Adventure Which Happened to Vladimir Maiakovsky in a Summer Country House."

**A.** The poem renders a scene in the middle of summer, with the sun, all scarlet, creating an almost unbearable heat. This scene so enrages the poet that he sends a tremendous shout to the center of the universe.

**B.** To his enormous surprise, the sun replies to his shout, which was an invitation. The chief luminary agrees to come to tea.

**C.** Overcoming his initial fears, Maiakovsky finds much in common with the sun. It seems that it is not so easy to shine all the time, while one is constantly on the move, giving light to Earth. The work is almost as draining as it is for the poet who has to turn out propaganda posters!

*I skoro,*
*Druzhby ne taia,*
*B'iu po plechu ego ia.*
*A solntse tozhe:*
*Ty da ia,*
*Nas, tovarishch, dvoe!*

And soon,
Not shirking our friendship,
I clapped him on the shoulder,
And the sun replied,
You and I,
That makes two of us, comrade!

**D.** It turns out that both of them share the same duty: to shine always and everywhere; nothing can interfere with this duty.

**E.** Maiakovsky pictures himself as an equal with the center of the universe, sharing the cosmic duty of lighting up the world. The poem is a wonderfully cheeky proclamation of the poet's power. How short a distance it is from this confident, not to say arrogant, stance to the republic that has to be pulled out of the mud!

**V.** Maiakovsky finds a solution to some of his and the socialist republic's problems in a rather unexpected place: Brooklyn, New York.

**A.** In 1925, Maiakovsky paid a visit to the United States and came to adore Roebling's Brooklyn Bridge. To be sure, one of its claims to fame turns out to be the glorious fact that the Russian poet stood

there while composing his verses. Nevertheless, the bridge itself stirs up strong feelings in the poet.

**B.** He begins with the notion that President Calvin Coolidge will shout and blush (red as the flag of the USSR) at the notion that a Soviet poet praises something in the United States:

> *Kak v tserkov' idet pomeshavshiisia veruiushchii,*
> *Kak v skit udaliaetsia strog i prost, -*
> *Tak ia v vechernei sereiushchei mereshchi*
> *Vkhozhu, smirennyi, na Bruklinskii most.*
>
> As a believer, who has gone out of his mind, enters a church,
> And then goes into a monastery, severe and simple,
> So I, in a graying evening fantasy,
> Humbled, step onto the Brooklyn Bridge.

**C.** It seems that all of New York has forgotten its troubles and its high buildings, and one hears only the soft drone of the elevated trains.

**D.** There is a softness about the scene that contrasts sharply with the determination of those who set a heavy steel foot into Manhattan and used cables to drag Brooklyn in by the lip.

**E.** The reader understands that Maiakovsky sees in the impressive architecture and technology of the bridge a creation for the future. This vision takes him out of his polemics with fellow artists and with the increasingly bureaucratic politicians at home.

**F.** Then, suddenly, he remembers that he is still a Soviet poet; the lyrical mood cannot be allowed to go too far. He pictures desperate unemployed workers leaping off the bridge into the Hudson River. Never mind that the bridge spans the East River, not the Hudson. The poor fellows would have had to do a broad jump all the way across Manhattan. Such a distortion of plain facts does not seem to have bothered the Soviet poet.

**G.** Still, the poem ends on a triumphant note, in praise of the bridge and the spirit it represents. The United States and the future of technology obviously deeply appeal to Maiakovsky.

**Suggested Reading:**

Vladimir Maiakovsky, *The Bedbug and Selected Poetry*, edited and with commentary by Patricia Blake; translated by Max Hayward and George Reavey.

Lawrence Stahlberger, *The Symbolic System of Majakovskij*.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. What attitude toward nature does the Bolshevik poet take when he invites the Sun to visit him at work? Does this affect our understanding of the way the Bolsheviks attempted to construct a socialist society that would lead to a communist paradise on Earth?
2. Why would a patriotic Soviet poet come to capitalist New York's Brooklyn Bridge in order to find a pattern of construction for the future triumph of communism? Did Maiakovsky's vision capture the bridge properly?

# Lecture Twenty-Eight
# The Revolution Makes a U-Turn

**Scope:** As the 1920s went forward, it became clear that socialist dreams were not sufficiently powerful to deal with economic and political realities. Maiakovsky's work began to take on a more defensive, less hopeful tone. He felt that he had to stave off attacks from his fellow socialists, as he shows in "At the Top of My Voice." Then, in 1929, he completed a very ambivalent and moving play, *The Bedbug*. Woody Allen's film *Sleeper* is, in many ways, derived from this play. The piece goes from an ironic derision of "*bourgeoisius vulgaris*" to a nostalgic fondness for the same and a hideous foretaste of Stalinist arrests and killings. One year later, Maiakovsky played Russian roulette with a loaded pistol and lost! His monument, not far from the center of Moscow, still preserves his defiant stance and the image of his expansive poetry.

## Outline

**I.** In the early 1920s, the Soviet Union was paying the price for all the dislocation that had been caused by the terrible loss of life in World War I, the revolution, the civil war, and the efforts at war communism, which had led nowhere.

- **A.** The economy was in ruins, as was the psychology of the country. In response, the Soviet government decided to promulgate the NEP (New Economic Policy). Individual economic enterprises were encouraged. Government controls were loosened, and the country began to stabilize.
- **B.** For Maiakovsky, this new policy seemed like a total betrayal of the cause for which the revolutionaries were supposed to be fighting. Increasingly, he found himself entangled in political and bureaucratic difficulties. He was discovering that it could be just as difficult, if not more so, to deal with a socialist regime as it had been to deal with the pre-revolutionary Russian reality.

**II.** In 1928–1929, Maiakovsky wrote a new play, *The Bedbug* (in Russian, the marvelous sound *khlop*). In its opening part, it deals with his consternation at the NEP.

**A.** At the beginning of the play, the major human character (in conjunction with the equally important bedbug of the title) appears in a strongly satirized version of the new free markets that appeared under the NEP.

**B.** Prisypkin, with his absurd cultural pretensions—he will change his name to Pierre Skripkin (connected with the Russian word for "violin")—is about to marry a girl named Elzevir Renaissance from a well-placed bourgeois family. Given that Prisypkin is a proletarian and a member of the Communist Party, the union will be one of Marxist revolutionaries and the forces of capitalism.

**C.** We soon learn, however, that he had previously been engaged to marry a young woman with a much more traditional Russian name, Zoia Beriozkina. When Zoia learns of this very Maiakovsky-like treachery, there is hell to pay. Prisypkin, ever gallant, threatens to call the police if Zoia attempts to interfere with his "freedom of love."

**D.** In a subsequent scene, Prisypkin's old revolutionary friends condemn his social climbing and his empty cultural pretensions. Even worse, they get the news that Zoia has attempted suicide—another reference to an incident in Maiakovsky's life.

**E.** The wedding day is set, and Maiakovsky gives us a burlesque of what a socialist civic wedding might be like in our wildest nightmares. The whole mess gets more and more grotesque, until someone sticks a fish in the bride's bosom.

**F.** Because of the immense aroma of alcohol in the air, the place soon goes up in flames, and the firemen's water turns into ice. Maiakovsky cannot resist a post-pyronuptual poem on the incendiary dangers of smoking in bed and reading poems by his opponents: One can fall into slumber while the fire starts.

**III.** The second part of the play occurs 50 years after the fire, when presumably, the whole world will have turned communist. One assumes that Maiakovsky will give the reader a notion of what the perfect state and society will be like.

**A.** There are a certain number of surprises here: The tone of the future is by no means totally uplifting, and the character of Prisypkin, who was preserved, together with his bedbug, in the ice resulting

from the efforts of the firemen at the wedding, takes a considerable leap upward in the reader's sympathy.

**B.** It seems that the whole communist world is about to vote on the question of whether or not Prisypkin and the bedbug should be resurrected. Of course, the vote turns out to be overwhelmingly positive.

**C.** Only one person in the new world objects: Zoia Beriozkina, who has survived her attempt at suicide. She remembers all too well the characteristics of the person about to be resurrected!

**D.** Almost immediately, Zoia's fears turn out to be justified. Prisypkin brings a disease far more powerful than the wonders of the brave new communist world—beer! The previously well-organized society is now totally corrupted by Prisypkin's introduction of alcohol.

**E.** Even more seriously, the bedbug escapes detection, and the whole society is launched in a mock-heroic expedition to bring it back for scientific observation.

**F.** By this time, Prisypkin has managed to infect the new world with his old world diseases of sloth, alcoholism, loose language, and looser love. We begin to realize that he looks rather appealing in contrast to a utopian future world that lacks the warmth and interest of human feelings and passions, no matter how filled they are with officially defined vice.

**IV.** It becomes clear that the only place for Prisypkin and his dear bedbug is the city zoo. The final scene, in which Prisypkin turns up in a cage, together with his bad habits and bedbug, is one of the most famous scenes from dramaturgy in Soviet times.

**A.** The chairman of the city Soviet gives a talk about the disgusting nature of the two specimens that the people are about to see. Maiakovsky pulls out all the rhetorical stops in describing the repellant character, not only of the bourgeoisie, but of those who call themselves proletarians but act like the bourgeoisie.

**B.** The curtain is then lifted from the cage, and we observe Prisypkin with his friend, the bedbug. Only now do we understand the charm and the warmth of the former world.

**C.** The keeper goes to unlock the cage, revolver in hand. Anyone who knows the Soviet reality, which became clear to the world after

this play was written, knows exactly to what the grim reference is made: the Soviet forced labor camps that imprisoned tens of millions and, in no small number of cases, executed their inhabitants.

**D.** Unexpectedly, Prisypkin jumps out and rushes forward to address the audience in the real theatre. He addresses them as his own and asks them how they returned from a frozen state. He asks them to join him and poses the question: "Why am I suffering?"

**E.** Prisypkin is dragged off by the zoo attendants. The grim and prophetic message is not hard to understand; consequently, the play was banned from the Soviet stage in Stalinist Russia. Only after 1953 and the death of the dictator was performance of the play revived.

**F.** Maiakovsky's own attitude comes across clearly. He is disgusted by the degree of sycophancy and lying promulgated by the very regime that he had been so eager to establish. Its notion of the great new communist utopia was one that would lead to imprisonment of the human spirit, rather than to the creative awakening that the poet had wanted to see.

**V.** Maiakovsky's last years were painful.

**A.** He had to watch his reputation sink and listen to the exultant accusations of his enemies, who believed that he was not a communist. He had to watch a society getting more and more distant from his own early ideals.

**B.** Suddenly, in 1930, the Soviet world was shocked by the news of Maiakovsky's suicide. The story was told that he played Russian roulette, not for the first time, and this time, he lost.

**1.** Recently, there have been some claims that he was killed by Stalin's security organs.

**2.** I have thus far seen no conclusive proof of that story, although many Russians believe it.

**VI.** Maiakovsky did leave a short final poem, one of his best:

**A.** It begins in the quiet of the night, describing love's boat, which has smashed—not "on the dashing rocks," as Romeo says in his famous final lines—but against what the Russians call *byt*, the

daily experience that all of us know. Maiakovsky then ends with an exquisite quatrain, perhaps the best he ever wrote:

*Ty posmotri, kakaia v mire tish'.*
*Noch' oblozhila nebo zvezdnoi dan'iu.*
*V takie vot chasy vstaesh' i govorish'*
*Vekam, istorii i mirozdaniiu.*

Just you look at the quiet in the world.
Night has laid across the sky a starry tribute.
In just such hours you take a stance and talk
To centuries, to history, and to the whole universe.

**B.** This poet, who considered himself the tribune of the Revolution, with a loud voice and intrusive manners, turns out to have a lyric voice virtually unmatched in the 20th century.

**Suggested Reading:**

Vladimir Maiakovsky, *Vladimir Majakovskij—Memoirs and Essays* (some in English, some in Russian), edited by Beng Jangfeldt and Nils Ake Nilsson.

Herbert Marshall, *Mayakovsky*.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. How do the elements of the future new society in the second half of *The Bedbug* compare with Maiakovsky's initial description of Soviet society in the 1920s? Does he predict genuine human progress for the future?
2. What elements in the life of the poet led him to suicide at the beginning of the 1930s? How did they lead to the flowing lyricism of his last poem?

# Lecture Twenty-Nine
# Mikhail Aleksandrovich Sholokhov, 1905–1984

**Scope:** Sholokhov's best work goes along lines very different from what we have seen in Gorky and Maiakovsky. If to them, the revolution represented something highly desired and necessary, Sholokhov saw it as a tragic force that wiped out a whole community—the Cossacks— who were very dear and close to him. It was entirely natural that these people, with their vigorous and colorful (albeit crude) culture, who had occupied a privileged position for three centuries under the tsars, formed the most active and militarily effective resistance to the establishment of a new revolutionary regime. In the first part of *And Quiet Flows the Don*, Sholokhov gives a vivid picture of pre-World War I Cossack life, with its rich farms, love of horses, lust for women, and a military tradition that habitually struck terror in the hearts of all enemies, foreign and domestic, of the tsar. Seen largely through the eyes of a decent man, Gregor Melekhov, Cossack life and lands appear in all their glory and all their defects.

## Outline

**I.** In the cases of Gorky and Maiakovsky, for all their differences, we have two men who are very much in the middle of events occurring in Russian urban areas around the time of the revolution and its immediate aftermath. They are both excited about the political events of their time, because they see in them enormous possibilities for the people of Russia and the USSR.

**A.** Sholokhov is a different case: He shows Cossacks who lived far from urban areas and who, for the most part, saw in these events nothing but destruction for themselves and for the culture they loved.

**B.** Sholokhov's most famous, Nobel Prize-winning novel, *And Quiet Flows the Don*, shows traditional Cossack life and its unusual place in the tsar's empire.

**C.** The people who became Cossacks in the 16th and 17th centuries had been serfs on Russian landed estates. They fled to the rich

lands located in the southwest reaches of the empire, just north of the Caucasus mountains, where they learned an extraordinary kind of horsemanship from the native populations.

**D.** Later on, in the 17th century, they signed a treaty of alliance with the Muscovite tsar, who promised to respect their ownership of the farmland in their area and gave them more autonomy than any other group possessed in the Muscovite lands at that time.

**E.** In return, the Cossacks promised to put their fearsome fighting abilities and cavalry under the command of the Russian army.

**F.** By the beginning of the 20th century, probably no community of people working the land in Russia was more loyal to the tsarist system than the Cossacks.

**G.** Sholokhov came to maturity as a writer in early Soviet times, and he knew that if he wanted to satisfy his ambitions as a writer, he had to frame his novel in terms that would not cause the Soviets to prevent its publication.

**H.** The result is a remarkable work of literature, written in the 1920s and early 1930s, that expresses love for and attraction to the colorful Cossack traditions while ostensibly showing its fealty to the new Soviet system being established and consolidated at that time.

**II.** The first part of the novel is entitled "Peace" and the second part "War." This choice might have been a conscious reversal of Tolstoy's famous title. In the first section, Sholokhov deals with the experience and passions of the Melekhov family, who have a farm in a typical Cossack village in the early 20th century.

**A.** The 19th-century progenitor of the family, Prokofii, had been a Cossack soldier in the Russo-Turkish Wars, from which he returned home with a Turkish war bride. She had to endure the hostility of the Cossack village, whose inhabitants, especially on the female side, found her obnoxious and unacceptable.

**B.** They were shocked by her foreign and non-Christian ways. It became clear to them that she was the cause of all the misfortunes of the village, especially the sickness of its cattle.

**C.** In a hideous opening scene, the Cossack villagers seize her while she is pregnant and trample her to death. The women do, however,

manage to save the infant she was carrying, and he (Pantaleimon) grows up to be the patriarch of the family in the novel.

**D.** His son, Gregor, is the protagonist of the novel, through whose eyes we see the events leading to war and revolution. Gregor can sometimes be cruel and oppressive.

**E.** Early in the novel, we see him fishing and wading in the cold waters of the rain-swept Don River. The force of the current and the sudden drops in the river's bottom soon make us feel the power of nature in Cossack territory.

**F.** In order to warm themselves, Gregor and Aksinia, the wife of Stepan, a neighbor of Gregor's family, jump into a haystack together. Gregor is enamored of the lady, and only the sudden arrival of his father makes him jump out, with his body steaming partly from the Don water and partly from other causes.

**G.** Gregor's father is terribly worried about his son's attraction, knowing full well the trouble and disorder such an affair can bring into the small and well-knit fabric of the Cossack village.

**H.** In spite of Gregor's arranged marriage to Natalia Kashunova, the affair with Aksinia continues, and Gregor realizes he will have to leave his home and his family. He runs off to work for wages on the estate of the aristocratic Lisnitsky family. Gregor is, thus, reduced to the status of a hired worker, a class much despised by the Cossacks, who value their independence as fighters and farmers on their own small plots of land.

**III.** The protagonist's affair is not the only force that causes serious divisions in the Cossack society. A great deal of political agitation is going on, and the various parties, especially those on the left, are looking for support in the population.

**A.** One fine day in the village, a stranger suddenly appears. His name is Osip Stockman, He asks his Cossack driver many detailed questions about life in the village and says that he has come to set up a locksmith's shop.

**B.** No sooner does he set up shop than he invites many of the poorer Cossacks to his house, for tea and card playing, which quickly turn into reading and lectures about the historical origins of the Cossack community.

**C.** The Cossacks are quite surprised to learn that they are descendants of people who once were serfs but who ran away to this territory. In the beginning, they resent the statement, as it seems to make them part of the peasantry, whom they distrust and dislike. But the accurate historical knowledge seeps in.

**D.** Shortly after Stockman's arrival, a serious conflict arises between the Ukrainian peasants and the Cossacks, both of whom have brought their wheat to the same mill for processing. An argument erupts about their respective places in the service line. Nasty words lead to blows, and soon, there is a threat of serious violence and even arson.

**E.** A previously unknown man in a black hat suddenly steps into the breach; it is Stockman. With a smile on his face and with impressive gestures, he addresses the Cossacks as countrymen, fellow Russians, and people descended from the same class and stock as the Ukrainian peasants.

**F.** The Cossacks reel from the shock of the statement and start to remonstrate. Meanwhile, the moment of peak stress has passed, and serious mob violence has been averted. The novel makes clear that the leftist radicals had a program that stressed ideology over national enmity, and they intended to try to unite people around that ideology.

**G.** Of course, the local police soon get wind of what has happened, and they call in Stockman for questioning. They advise him, in no uncertain terms, to leave the district. They have no use for a person who stops violence between nationalities and tells the truth about history!

**H.** Near the end of the first part of the novel, Stockman is arrested and deported, under police guard, from the region. The local people are amazed to see someone who actually has the nerve to challenge the authority and power of the tsar.

**I.** The reader understands that great forces are in motion that will make terrible rents in the fabric of a village that has been so well and organically integrated over many previous generations.

**IV.** Finally, of course, the first major step in the actual destruction of the village comes with the onset of World War I, with Russian forces fighting against the armies of industrially developed Germany and Austria-Hungary.

**A.** Near the onset of the war, we see the Cossacks called up for their usual terms of military training. Even Gregor, who now lives and works outside the Cossack village, on the Lisnitsky estate, nevertheless has to report to the army training camp, bringing equipment and a horse from home.

**B.** Gregor exhibits characteristics that in some important ways differ from the traits of those around him. Although sometimes capable of crudeness and even cruelty to women, he is also capable of a sensitivity and compassion unusual for the ordinary Cossack. While he is reaping in the field, his scythe hits a duck that has been concealed in the tall grass. He instinctively picks up the wounded animal and tries to warm it with his body.

**C.** In the training camp, we see a terrible scene of gang rape. The young men get hold of a young serving woman and roughly set her down in a barn for their sexual pleasure. The one person to protest is Gregor, who braves the displeasure of his fellow Cossacks in an attempt to prevent the rape. They overpower him, in spite of his struggles, but it is clear that he has a conscience very different from theirs. Through his eyes, we will see the coming portentous events quite differently from the way other Cossacks do.

**V.** The coming violence of World War I and its revolutionary aftermath will consume the Cossack world with fire and almost total destruction. Gregor will be in the midst of horrific events. Yet in many ways, both large and small, he will retain an unusual sense of humanity and moral balance, as we will see in the next lecture.

**Suggested Reading:**

C. G. Bearne, *Sholokhov*.

Mikhail Sholokhov, *And Quiet Flows the Don*, translated by Stephen Garry.

**Questions to Consider:**

**1.** What were the main elements of stability in Cossack traditions and life as it appeared in the time before the beginning of World War I in 1914? Remember that the traditions covered many aspects of spiritual and material life.

**2.** What were the main forces, as depicted in Sholokhov's novel, that upset this stability even before the events starting in 1914? How many of them came from outside the Cossack world, and how many from inside?

# Lecture Thirty
# Revolutions and Civil War

**Scope:** When Sholokhov's Cossacks think of war, they think of the Cossack traditions of cavalry charges and hand-to-hand combat. In World War I, they face the armies of industrialized Germany and Austria-Hungary. The novel's presentation of historical change is only intensified by the ideological strife, new for the Cossacks, involved in revolutions and civil war. Suddenly, all of the old social norms turn topsy-turvy, and a politically uneducated man like Gregor, as well as his family and friends, are hard pressed to know in which direction to turn. They end up on many different sides, hardly recognizing people that they have known since childhood. In many ways, the same holds true for the supposedly stalwart ranks of the Bolsheviks, who position themselves to destroy the Cossack culture and life. The novel is an unsurpassed presentation of what it feels like to experience revolution firsthand. Some 35 years after writing the novel, Sholokhov would occupy a very different position when he called for the execution of some dissidents in the USSR. Then, some of his previously loyal readers excoriated him with a horrendous curse for a writer: "We wish you complete sterility."

## Outline

**I.** World War I was a disastrous time for Russia. Tsar Nikolai II unwisely brought Russia into the fighting, and the economic and military weaknesses of his country soon became apparent. In ghastly battles against the Germans in East Prussia, the Russians lost literally millions of men. Meanwhile, the internal political and economic structure of the country began to fall apart.

**A.** Gregor and his family learned about the war's outbreak while they were wielding scythes on a blisteringly hot summer day, with the sweat pouring down their bodies. Suddenly, they saw a Cossack horseman in the distance, riding hell for leather across the plain. The horse was visibly dropping saliva in the summer dust, leaving wet spots on the parched ground.

**B.** Their natural reaction was wonderment that a Cossack would so obviously misuse a horse. Then they heard the rider shout the word "Alarm!" Instantly, they knew general mobilization was under way, and the well-drilled men rushed to get their equipment and report for duty.

**C.** In the beginning, things seemed to go normally. Gregor was a courageous fighting man and, as an expert horseman, well knew how to wield a wicked saber. Yet the killing of an Austrian soldier gave him no pleasure, and he felt a terrible heaviness after his so-called triumph.

**D.** Sholokhov draws a clear distinction between Gregor and Uriupin, the truly cruel soldier who glories in killing. He and Gregor come close to blows when Uriupin doesn't hesitate to kill the unarmed and friendly Austrian who was all too eager to surrender. Gregor's firm principle becomes: No killing of unarmed prisoners!

**E.** There are other, more subversive elements in the Russian army. The company officer Lisnitsky, on whose family's farm Gregor worked, meets a rather mysterious young man, built like a cork elm, who always wants to volunteer for dangerous duty. His name is Bunchuk, a recognizably Ukrainian name, and he claims that he wants to learn the science of war.

**F.** Lisnitsy finds him rather suspicious and starts to investigate. It turns out that Bunchuk wants Russia to be defeated in the war as a prelude to a general workers' revolution, which will sweep the tsar and his supporters from power.

**G.** Lisnitsky is first astounded, then disgusted. He decides to report Bunchuk to his superiors, but it is too late: The Marxist has deserted and disappeared.

**H.** Parallel to these events, Gregor has been wounded and sent to a hospital in Moscow. There, he meets a Ukrainian Marxist, Garanzha, who argues that Gregor has simply become an unthinking pawn in the hands of the government. This propaganda sinks deeply into Gregor's consciousness. He has no knowledge with which to answer the charge.

**I.** Perhaps even more tellingly, there is a very different kind of local revolt in the village. Gregor's sister-in-law, Daria, an intelligent but self-destructive young woman, decides to enjoy herself with any man to whom she takes a fancy. When Gregor's father tries to

discipline her, she turns on him with fury, inviting him to satisfy her if he does not want others to do it. He retreats in confusion and learns, for the first time, what it means to face resistance to his previously unchallenged patriarchal authority.

**J.** Clearly, big changes are underway.

**II.** Then, news comes about the enormous change in Russia's government: in February–March of 1917, Tsar Nikolai II abdicates and a democratic parliamentary republic is created. Soon, the extreme leftists under Lenin are attacking the new government from the left, and former tsarist generals are attacking from the right.

**A.** The Cossacks are totally bewildered by the ongoing changes. The Cossack soldiers are led out to swear a new oath of allegiance, this time to the new provisional government. They cannot consider a second oath seriously, because they previously took an oath in favor of the tsar that was supposed to last until death.

**B.** The Cossack s are sent to St. Petersburg, where numerous political arguments erupt. Particularly dramatic is the confrontation of Lisnitsky with a Bolshevik soldier, Dugin, who questions why the Lisnitsky family should keep its 8,000-acre estate, when poorer people, such as the soldier's family, can barely scratch a living out of their small land parcel.

**C.** On a train where Cossacks are being urged to join the right-wing forces attempting to overthrow the provisional government, Bunchuk reappears. He speaks cleverly to prevent the Cossacks from joining, and, in the process, he executes in cold blood one of the officers who tries to resist his agitation.

**D.** Gregor finds himself surrounded by conflicting political opinions: There are those who want an independent Cossack land, and there are those who want to fight for the tsar and those who support the Bolshevik cause. Gregor does not have the education or sophistication to refute their views, and he finds himself pulled in many directions.

**E.** The strongest influence on him at that time is Podtielkov, the Bolshevik commander, who persuades him to come over to the side of the extreme revolutionaries. On one point, however, even the fluent Podtielkov shows uncharacteristic embarrassment. When Gregor asks the commander about the future ownership of the

land, Podtielkov momentarily hesitates. He cannot tell the Cossacks about the plans for collectivization of agriculture, which will wipe out their individual farms.

**III.** In October–November of 1917, the question of political control in 20th-century Russia was, of course, settled by the Bolshevik seizure of power from the Duma and its democratic parties. Lenin and his followers were determined to create what they called a "dictatorship of the proletariat."

**A.** The result of this political upset was a hideously bloody and destructive civil war, which lasted from late 1918 until 1922. The Cossacks, with their military traditions, were deeply and tragically immersed in the general butchery.

**B.** In the beginning of the part of the novel devoted to the civil war, the reader sees Bunchuk reporting to a commander named Abramson in the Bolshevik military headquarters. Not only do we see a Jewish officer, previously unthinkable in the Russian context, but he virtually forces Bunchuk to admit a woman into his group, which is taking instruction about the use of the machine gun.

**C.** The young woman, Anna Pogódko, also turns out to be Jewish, and she exhibits unusual spirit and intelligence in the group. Bunchuk cannot resist her energy and spirit; soon, they become lovers.

**D.** Their relationship is presented in a rather sensitive, touching way, but their conversation is entirely different from what we hear among the Cossacks. When they talk about their happiness in terms of a mighty, perfectly harmonized hymn to socialism, we realize that we are hearing empty rhetoric, rather than the expression of human feeling.

**E.** The relationship between the two develops in a perfectly believable way. There are moments when she gets angry at him, especially when he finds himself impotent after a time when he has been supervising the execution by firing squads of hundreds of arrested Cossacks.

**F.** She is a real support for Bunchuk in times of battle, and he is devastated, virtually dehumanized, when she is killed by an enemy bullet.

**G.** Gregor, meanwhile, finds it impossible to remain with the Red troops when Podtielkov insists, against orders, on massacring the White officers captured after a battle. All the way through the book, Gregor has stood against the slaughter of unarmed prisoners.

**H.** Gregor returns home to the Cossack village, where he hears the news that the Red forces are invading the district and behaving badly. The Cossacks pull themselves together and, once more, make a formidable local fighting force.

**I.** Podtielkov's forces are surrounded and have no choice but to surrender themselves and their arms to the Cossacks. *And Quiet Flows the Don* ends with the brutal execution of almost the whole Red force.

**J.** Sholokhov has managed to show convincingly the enormous amount of cruelty and suffering imposed at a time when society is pulled up by its roots. There is probably no better existing picture of a giant revolution in action.

**IV.** Sholokhov, here and in other places, shows a considerable amount of insight and courage in his writing. It is sad to recount what happened to him later, in the 1960s. By that time, his work had become a kind of classic in the history of Soviet literature; his novel had been awarded the Nobel Prize.

**A.** When two Soviet writers, Daniil and Siniavsky, sent some of their dissenting works abroad, Sholokhov was the one Soviet writer who came out in support of the government's arresting them. To express their feelings, which they could not do openly, his readers mailed back to him 10,000 copies of *And Quiet Flows the Don.*

**B.** In an open letter sent both to *Pravda* and *The New York Times*, a courageous Soviet woman, Lidia Chukovskaia, eloquently spoke to Sholokhov's support of the arrests.

**C.** She reminded him that one of the greatest qualities of Russian literature was its deep compassion for those who suffer. She reminded him of his own sympathy for the Cossacks expressed at a difficult time.

**D.** She then pointed out that he not only sided with the Soviet government's repression of the two arrested writers and critics, but he even urged that they should be executed.

**E.** For such a deed, Chukovskaia said, Russian literature could wish him, the prize-winning Mikhail Sholokhov, only one thing: "utter sterility."

**Suggested Reading:**

Isaak Babel, *The Collected Stories*, which includes "Red Cavalry" and other stories that offer a different account of the Cossacks who fought on the side of the Red Army and the Bolsheviks.

Roy Medevedev, *Problems in the Literary Biography of Mikhail Sholokhov*.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. In what way could an intelligent yet almost totally uneducated Cossack understand the basic changes taking place in the country that had once been called Russia but was now headed toward the appellation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics?
2. How would a writer such as Sholokhov, who had made his reputation during the struggle to establish a socialist Soviet Union, react to later Soviet intellectuals who wanted to see a more sophisticated, advanced society that would offer its citizens wider freedoms and choices?

# Lecture Thirty-One
# Mikhail Mikhailovich Zoshchenko, 1895–1958

**Scope:** Thus far, we have dealt with Soviet writers who took the revolution and the Soviet regime very seriously. Probably the most popular writer in the Soviet Union, Mikhail Zoshchenko, took a different approach: He considered the whole experience fodder for satire and laughter. Somewhat in the style of our own newspaper satirists Art Buchwald and Russell Baker, Zoshchenko wrote mostly short stories, sometimes very short, that shed a ridiculous light on the many hypocritical and often downright crazy aspects of Soviet propaganda and life. Miraculously, in the context of Soviet control, he got away with it for quite some time, often under the protective cover of a narrative style that seemed to disassociate the author from the civic vices he so lovingly portrayed. The lightness and skill of his presentation seemed to forestall any possible ideological offense. A good example of his deftness, as well as his remarkable and unusual courage, can be found in the story "Pelageia," which takes off from the milieu connected with the famous Soviet campaign for mass literacy.

## Outline

**I.** A different view of Soviet literature and life is presented by the most popular Russian writer in Soviet times, Mikhail Zoshchenko. In the 1920s, he started to delight Soviet readers with short pieces that obviously poked fun at what he considered the absurd aspects of socialist slogans and life under socialist control. In a wonderfully fantastic way, he combined the sloganeering popular at that time and a kind of slang used by largely uneducated people.

**A.** For almost 25 years, Zoshchenko succeeded in protecting himself by hiding behind the form of his stories. Writing in a style often used in popular stories and anecdotes, he could always claim that the statements and attitudes of the characters did not represent his own way of thinking.

**B.** Perhaps one of his best and most touching stories had to do with the broad public campaign against illiteracy in the USSR. Certainly one could hardly argue against such a campaign. One of

the greatest achievements of the Soviet Union was to turn a population that had been kept extensively illiterate by the tsarist regime into an almost completely literate people.

**C.** Yet, as implied by Zoshchenko, there were many possible ways of attacking the problem. Some of them exhibited a much greater degree of human sensitivity than did others.

**D.** Zoshchenko illustrates this point in a story called "Pelageia," a rather simple Russian woman's name, often used by peasants. Such a woman was married to a former peasant who had become a responsible Soviet official. In the process of making a career, he had acquired no small amount of self-importance. He was especially embarrassed to be married to an illiterate woman.

**E.** The official tried to urge his wife to become literate, but she simply waved his words aside, not even looking at the special textbook he brought her.

**F.** But matters changed when she discovered a perfumed envelope with a woman's handwriting on it while she was repairing her husband's jacket. For the first time, she regretted that she had not listened to the words of the anti-illiteracy campaign. Was he cheating on her?

**G.** For two solid months, she undertook the painful job of learning how to read.

**H.** Finally, she mastered the text and read the letter. One of her husband's female colleagues had given him the literacy textbook and told him to explain that it was disgusting to be an illiterate peasant woman.

**I.** Pelageia read the letter through twice. Then, feeling somehow secretly insulted, she pressed her lips together and began to cry.

**J.** In this very simple story, Zoshchenko put together the common feeling of insult at the constant condescension of the Soviet government toward its own people.

**II.** Zoshchenko wrote a series of stories touching on some of the most pressing problems of everyday life. His comic approach, involving satire and parodies of the common slogans of socialism, made the stories all the more delightful.

**A.** One of the ubiquitous problems of Soviet existence was the ever-present housing shortage. It became necessary for families to live

in one or two rooms, and millions of people had to share kitchens and bathrooms in "communal apartments."

**B.** Zoshchenko became a master at exploiting the changing human foibles that resulted from such circumstances. In the process, he also caught the incredible agility shown by individuals who had to cope with living under such conditions.

**C.** One of his best-known sketches, written earlier, in 1925, dealt with what he called "the crisis." It opens with a phrase about the author's heart starting to beat with joy—he just noticed a load of bricks being carted through the street, in other words, some kind of new housing was being built!

**D.** He even fantasizes about what it might mean for a family to live in more than one room.

**E.** It turns out that the narrator of the story had to rent the only thing available: a bathroom. He soon got married, and his wife came to the conclusion that all kinds of nice people live in bathrooms.

**F.** The only problem was that the other 32 tenants of the apartment also had to use the facilities, and they didn't take kindly to the suggestion that they confine to Saturdays their actions of washing and eliminating.

**G.** Things got a bit more complicated when the couple had a baby, but there was a bright side to the situation: The infant experienced daily bathing.

**H.** Then, the mother-in-law couldn't help but want to live close to her grandchild, so she moved in, with the promise that her son would also soon join her.

**I.** Even the long-suffering narrator reacts to this turn of events and moves out and away from the city of Moscow. He sends his family money by mail.

**III.** The Soviet officials used to boast a great deal about the wide availability of free socialist health care. There were, in fact, a number of reasons for them to take pride in the system. Infant mortality was sharply reduced, in contrast to pre-revolutionary times, and public sanitation was vastly improved. When it came to individual treatment of patients, however, there was a common popular Soviet saying: "Our health care is worth every *kopeck* [penny] we do not spend on it."

**A.** Zoshchenko was something of a hypochondriac, and he knew about Soviet hospitals. In his well-known story "The History of an Illness," he describes the first thing he sees when entering a Soviet hospital: a sign that reads "Delivery of corpses, every Thursday, 3:00–4:00."

**B.** When he expresses surprise, the hospital attendant tells him to stop his criticism. Otherwise, he himself will be duly delivered between those hours.

**C.** Not surprisingly, the narrator's treatments do not go well. Each step of the way, the hospital staff makes the material conditions worse by their utter indifference to the patient's welfare.

**D.** The climax comes when the narrator learns that his wife had been mistakenly notified to pick up his dead body. This news so angers him that he finally decides to complain officially. But when he remembers what sorts of things happen there at the hospital, he decides not to complain after all.

**IV.** Zoshchenko's popularity surely arose both from his sharp appraisal and the lightness of his humor in portraying the absurdity of the daily circumstances of Stalin's Russia. He also captured the considerable courage of people caught in a series of binds yet ready to laugh at themselves and the circumstances of their lives.

**A.** The Soviet government boasted about achieving equality for women. One of its claims was that more than 90 percent of medical personnel were female, implying that these women were trained doctors. In reality, they were qualified only to treat routine illnesses and earned low wages. Overworked and stressed out, they were often short-tempered.

**B.** Another fact of Soviet medical life was the common use of vodka to treat illness.

**C.** That Zoshchenko caught all these aspects of everyday life is what made his work so very popular.

**Suggested Reading:**

Mikhail Zoshchenko, *Nervous People and Other Stories*, translated by Maria Gordon and Hugh McLean, with a critical introduction by McLean. (Skip the early part and read the title story.)

**Questions to Consider:**

1. Why would an intelligent and sympathetic author write a satirical and humorous story about the attempt to bring literacy to a previously illiterate person?
2. What sort of temperament would form in a society in which the government talks about meeting the real material needs of the population and insists that people publicly support its every move, yet in actuality, it is difficult to find a decent place to live and medical service is provided by people who are too rushed to give decent attention and care?

# Lecture Thirty-Two
# Among the Godless—Religion and Family Life

**Scope:** One of the deepest psychological problems for ordinary people in Soviet Russia had to do with religion. The regime, speaking for the society, whether or not the society liked it, loudly proclaimed the Soviet Union a godless, materialist, atheist country. Religion was officially branded backward and primitive, conceived to make people obedient to a previous reactionary regime. This position flew straight in the face of millions who held on to a deep and traditional Christian faith. In addition to the denunciation of religion, other changes in society also affected the family in fundamental ways. In his satires, Zoshchenko catches these effects and the general instability that people felt.

## Outline

**I.** One of the most important elements of pre-revolutionary Russian consciousness, and one of the strongest props of the tsarist regime, was the Russian branch of the Eastern Orthodox Christian Church. Consequently, a basic tenet of the Soviet regime was an aggressively stated and promulgated godlessness.

**A.** Good socialist people were expected to reject the very idea of God. Atheism was the Soviet order of the day. For a people steeped in religious tradition, as the Russians were, this order was a difficult one to obey, almost a challenge to the very idea of what it meant to be a Russian.

**B.** Zoshchenko wrote a series of stories on Soviet citizens facing the problems caused by the official removal of the Christian God from the extensive heavens above the huge Russian land. One could, of course, argue that the Soviet high officials themselves were to replace the Christian God as figures of adoration. But gods on Earth are no match for a deity above.

**C.** In a story called “Rosa-Maria,” Zoshchenko deals with some of these issues. The story concerns a village official who was so progressive that he had once belonged to an atheist group. But he was being nagged by his wife and her mother to have his baby daughter christened in the Church.

**D.** He is fearful of how his socialist comrades will react to a christening, yet he is facing both his nagging family and something inside of him that urges religious action.

**E.** When he gets to the church, however, he cannot refrain from making derisive remarks about the priest's appearance, the ceremony, the very idea of the whole process in a socialist era.

**F.** The priest finally gets fed up with this petty harassment and warns the official that such remarks cannot possibly help the future fate of the baby girl who is the subject of the ceremony.

**G.** This altercation leads to more anger on both sides, and the priest tells the family to take the child away. The other relatives shush the father and persuade the priest to go ahead with the ceremony.

**H.** All goes well until the priest asks for the intended name of the baby. When he hears the name Rosa, he refuses to go on; it is not in his list of saints' names. The father protests that it is already entered in the civic registry, but the priest is adamant.

**I.** At that point, a visitor suggests the name Rosa-Maria, which the priest accepts as long as he is required to pronounce aloud only the second, holy part of the name.

**J.** Zoshchenko ends the story with a moral: Do not enter the church if your philosophy is hostile to it. If you do go in, do not annoy the priest with stupid remarks.

**II.** Soviet people tended to find another refuge from the stresses of daily life and the difficulties of family life, which a housing shortage and other external pressures had made intensely close, with all of the attendant characteristics: feelings of attachment were very strong, as were negative feelings, including resentment and jealousy.

**A.** Zoshchenko catches this situation in a series of stories, some of them not far from the classical French bedroom farce, with a special Soviet and Russian flavor. One of them is called "An Amusing Adventure." It starts by describing an affair between two married people, a young woman from a petty bourgeois family who has fallen in love with an actor whom she saw and admired on the stage.

**B.** They try to find a meeting place for their trysts, but nothing is available. The young woman gets permission from her friend, a ballet dancer, to use the dancer's apartment. On the way to the

tryst, the actor gets into an argument on a trolley car and spits in his opponent's face. Luckily, the man was leaving the vehicle, and the actor did not have to face a fight.

**C.** When the couple meets at the apartment, their conversation is interrupted by a knock at the door. The voice is that of the woman's husband, who then leaves a tender love note for the ballet dancer whose apartment the couple is using.

**D.** The woman's dancer friend returns and their conversation is interrupted by the woman's husband, who has come back to see his dancer paramour. The two women insist that the actor escape through another apartment, but when he enters this apartment, he finds the outer door locked.

**E.** While trapped there, the actor is discovered by a man who opens the outside door; this man, it turns out, is also arriving for a tryst. To his horror, the actor suddenly realizes this man is the one into whose face he spat earlier.

**F.** As the actor is manhandled and hustled out the door, he sees the woman arriving for the tryst. She is his own wife! From a timid mouse-like fellow, he suddenly turns into an enraged, roaring lion.

**G.** When the people in the adjoining room hear the noise, they come rushing in, and the scene turns into a marital conference: Who shall marry whom; who shall stay with whom?

**H.** In the end, they all decide to go on exactly as they were at the beginning of the story, with some of the men seeing some of the women on the sly.

**III.** Zoshchenko clearly implies that human nature and human pretensions do not change significantly, regardless of historical and ideological changes.

**A.** Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Zoshchenko's reading public responded to him with great affection. His sketches were enormously popular, and the Soviet authorities seemed to accept him.

**B.** Immediately after the war, many Soviet people expected a somewhat more lenient regime. After all, they had undergone enormous sacrifices, with the loss of more than 20 million people, to defeat a ferocious and well-armed enemy. Their loyalty to the country could hardly be questioned.

**C.** The response of the Stalinist regime was a strong crackdown on the population as a whole. The arrests and exiles into forced labor camps continued at an even greater pace.

**D.** One of the most widely publicized events in this campaign was the castigation and humiliation of Zoshchenko, in the company of one of the finest poets of the 20th century, Anna Akhmatova. They were accused of a number of crimes by a functionary named Zhdanov, whose name became another word for repression in the USSR.

**E.** Zhdanov claimed that Zoshchenko saw the USSR as a zoo, in which monkeys live better than human beings.

**F.** Zhdanov called Anna Akhmatova "half nun, half whore," certainly reaching a new level of literary criticism.

**G.** There were, of course, wide circles of intellectuals, in the USSR and abroad, who sympathized with Zoshchenko and Akhmatova. Within the USSR, however, it was virtually impossible to express this sympathy openly. Akhmatova had great inner strength and managed to survive rather heroically.

**H.** Zoshchenko did not have that kind of strength, and he was hurt badly by his exclusion from published literature. He survived Stalin by only four years and was unable to make his voice heard publicly.

**I.** In the more open days of the 1960s, his stories were republished, and he stands today as a representative of those people who struggled, often with a potent use of humor, against the repression of a tyrannical and powerful regime.

**Suggested Reading:**

Mikhail Zoshchenko, *Nervous People and Other Stories*.

**Questions to Consider:**

**1.** The ideas of atheism are, after all, quite powerful: They propelled a strong revolution (by "godless ones," as the Soviets proudly called themselves). Why were they ultimately so unsuccessful in winning the genuine allegiance of the vast majority of Russians, several generations of whom lived under strong propaganda from the godless ones?

**2.** What is there in the nature of humor that makes it so obviously dangerous to a repressive political regime? Why can those in power in such a regime not just laugh it off?

# Lecture Thirty-Three
# Boris Leonidovich Pasternak, 1890–1960

**Scope:** Pasternak became one of the major prophets of the 20th century. Raised in a family of artists and musicians, he eventually settled on poetry as his means of artistic expression. Not only were his own poems of very high quality, but he also mastered the art of translation in an unusually powerful way. His translations of Shakespeare breathed a new and different life into the art of the Elizabethan poet, and they kept Pasternak in a field of endeavor much less politically dangerous in the Stalinist USSR than writing his own poetry. Later, in the era of Khrushchev's so-called "thaw," he took the chance of publishing a novel, which gained instant international fame and caused Pasternak to feel the fury of the Soviet government.

## Outline

**I.** Pasternak was born into a highly cultivated and prominent family. His father was a well-known artist and designer who made famous illustrations for some of Tolstoy's works. His mother was a well-known concert pianist.

**A.** Pasternak himself was interested in music as a young child; later, he received his higher education in Germany, where he found himself attracted to philosophy. As a young man, he started publishing poetry and soon achieved a reputation as part of a new generation of Russian poets who were exploring new forms of poetry, akin to that of the futurists.

**B.** In the early years of the revolution, Pasternak had considerable sympathy for the spirit and changes that seemed to be sweeping the country.

**C.** In the 1930s, the Soviet government became uncomfortable with its radical literary allies. With its official support for socialist realism, the regime became increasingly conservative in cultural matters.

**D.** Pasternak turned out to be sensitive to the changes in the political climate and adept at surviving at a time when many cultural figures became victims of Stalinist arrests and executions.

**II.** Pasternak turned a great deal of his energy toward magnificent artistic translation. Perhaps best known among his translations are five Shakespearean tragedies.

**A.** One of his most beautiful renditions comes near the end of *Othello*, when the Moor is standing over his beautiful sleeping wife, Desdemona, and contemplating the lovely light he is about to extinguish:

> It is the cause, it is the cause my soul,
> Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars!
>
> *Takov moi dolg. Takov moi dolg. Styzhus'*
> *Nazvat' pred vami, devstvennye zvezdy,...*

He then goes on:

> If I quench thee, thou flaming minister,
> I can again thy former light restore,
> Should I repent me; but once put out thy light,
> Thou cunningst pattern of excelling nature,
> I know not where is that Promethean heat
> That can thy light relume.
>
> *Kogda ia pogashu*
> *Svetil'nik i ob etom pozhaleiu,*
> *Ne gore—mozhno vnov' ego zazhech',*
> *Kogda zh ia ugashu tebia, siian'e*
> *Zhivogo chuda, redkost' bez tseny,*
> *Na svete ne naidetsia Prometeia*
> *Chtob vnov' tebia zazhech' kak ty byla.*

Even those who do not know Russian can appreciate the incredible rhythm of these Russian lines.

**B.** In *Hamlet*, the prince has harsh words of farewell to Polonius, whom Hamlet has just stabbed to death behind the arras in his mother's bedroom:

Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell!
I took thee for thy better; take thy fortune;
Thou findst to be too busy is some danger.

*Proshchai, vertliavyi, glupyi khlopotun!*
*Tebia ia sputal s kem-to povazhnee.*
*Ty vidish', suetlivost' ne k dobru.*

Pasternak here catches the rough bouncing of Hamlet's angry yet anguished words and his disappointment at not having caught King Claudius.

**C.** Finally, there are the extraordinary renderings of Elizabethan songs. When Ophelia reacts to the murder of her father by the prince whom she wants to love, she sings:

He is dead and gone, lady,
He is dead and gone;
At his head a grass green turf
At his heels, a stone

Tomorrow is St. Valentine's Day,
All in the morning betime,
And I a maid at your window,
To be your Valentine.
Then up he rose and donn'd his clothes,
And dupped the chamber door;
Let in the maid, that out a maid
Never departed more.

*Pomer ledi, pomer on,*
*Pomer, tol'ko sleg.*
*V golovakh zelenyi drok,*
*Kamushek u nog.*

*S rassaveta v valentinov den'*
*Ia proberus' k dveriam*
*I u okna soglas'e dam*
*Byt' valentinoi vam.*
*On vstal, odelsia, otper dver',*
*I ta, chto v dver' voshla,*
*Uzhe ne devushkoi ushla*
*Iz etogo ugla.*

Pasternak has caught the melodic line precisely, and the effect retains all the Shakespearean pathos.

**III.** After World War II, Pasternak came to the conclusion that his times demanded prose rather than poetry; thus, he brought out the manuscript of a novel that he had written with a sort of epilogue in poetry. He called it *Doctor Zhivago*. He gave his title character a family name that is an older Russian form of the word "alive."

**A.** Pasternak submitted the completed manuscript to his Soviet publishers, and it remained with them for almost two years. There were very strong polemics inside the publishing house, with powerful voices on both the positive and the negative sides.

**B.** Finally, the Soviets decided that the novel contained views on the revolution and the Soviet regime that were too dangerous to publish. They wanted revisions that Pasternak was loath to make.

**C.** The writer then put the manuscript into the hands of an Italian communist publisher, Feltrinelli. Pasternak instructed him to wait for a year. If the Soviets still refused publication, Feltrinelli was to publish the manuscript exactly as he received it, regardless of what Pasternak might have to say publicly.

**D.** When the year went by, Feltrinelli went ahead, and all hell broke loose among Soviet publishers. Pasternak made a public statement against publication, knowing full well the instructions he had already given.

**E.** The novel was published abroad and made a powerful impression internationally, much to the embarrassment of the Soviet regime. Pasternak was awarded the Nobel Prize, obviously on the basis of the novel.

**F.** This development precipitated a vicious campaign against Pasternak in the Soviet press, where, among other things, he was accused of being "a pig who soils his own nest"—quite an original phrase of congratulations to a countryman who has just been awarded the Nobel Prize!

**Suggested Reading and Viewing:**

Lazar Fleishman, *Boris Pasternak: The Poet and His Politics*.

Grigorii Kozintsev, *Hamlet*, the film with English subtitles, translated by Boris Pasternak, with music by Dmitri Shostakovich.

William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* and *Othello*, in *The Complete Works*, edited by W. J. Craig.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. In what way would the regime of Claudius, the usurping king in *Hamlet*, who is being opposed by the title character, resonate in the imagination of a sensitive poet living under the Soviet regime or under any repressive regime?
2. How would the ultimately misdirected but strong and sincere passion of Othello resound in the ears of a great 20th-century poet writing in another language whose culture greatly values the work of Shakespeare?

# Lecture Thirty-Four
# The Poet In and Beyond Society

**Scope:** The title of *Doctor Zhivago* includes the old form of the genitive case in the word for "alive." This genitive is also used as the accusative only for animate words attached to living humans or animals. In short, Pasternak is talking about life itself in its oldest, traditional form. Finding himself in a society calling itself socialist, with full value assigned to the collective, the poet—referring both to the title character and the author— wants to establish himself as an individual, separate from the collective. Repeatedly, Soviet society wants to draft the doctor, who creates some of Pasternak's best poetry, into its over-organized and overarching *civitas*. The result is a continuous struggle, which cannot be diverted by marriage or love affairs, by political propaganda, by warfare, or even by the full powers of nature herself. When the poet sees the beauty of the snowbound Russian woods, he uses it to separate himself from the world around him. The result leads to isolation, poetry of the first order, and death.

## Outline

**I.** *Doctor Zhivago* makes us look at some of the major historical and political events of early-20th-century Russia and the USSR through the deeply introspective eyes of the title character, who is both a medical doctor and a major poet. The whole emphasis of the novel is on an individual who finds many ways to separate himself from the society around him.

**A.** The novel begins near the beginning of the 20th century. As a young boy, on a cold day in the Russian winter, Iurii Zhivago witnesses the burial of his mother. That evening, we sense a Russian blizzard through the force of Pasternak's poetic prose. It seemed that the snowstorm would bury both the cabbage patch and his mother, ever more deeply and helplessly, into the ground.

**B.** This image is the first of many throughout the novel that show Zhivago's isolation from a Russia that both natural forces and human events are driving away from him. His deeply poetic

sensibility allows him to remember the now lost wealth of the Zhivago family as a kind of golden dream.

**C.** The first part of the novel shows the events leading up to World War I and the two revolutions of 1917. We see the confused political and religious thought coursing through the last decades of tsarist rule.

**D.** The revolutionaries demand that people think exactly as the leftists do. We understand that Zhivago will never be at home among people who spout unceasingly and unreflectively a rigid ideology in words that become hopeless clichés.

**II.** Zhivago serves as an army doctor among Russian troops in World War I. In one of the novel's many coincidental events, he meets Lara, a nurse in the military hospital where he is serving. He knew her when they were both young. There begins a growing attraction between them.

**A.** Going home to Moscow, Zhivago is given what he later finds out is a priceless gift—a hunter's freshly killed duck. It makes an unusual feast when he arrives home in hunger-ridden Moscow.

**B.** Zhivago serves enthusiastically in the socialist medical services; he is convinced, for a time, that the society can become better. Some of his friends consider his convictions impossibly Red, but he sticks to his guns.

**C.** While he continues his medical work, the situation in Moscow goes from bad to worse, with shortages of all necessary food and supplies, general malnutrition, and rampaging sickness, especially during the terrible winter months.

**D.** Finally, it is clear there is nothing to keep the family in Moscow. They decide to leave for a former estate that belonged to the family of Zhivago's wife, thousands of miles to the east, in Siberia.

**III.** The most impressive part of the novel is the description of the subsequent train trip, which takes the family deep into Siberia. Pasternak manages to get across the huge expanse of the country, whitened and seemingly stretched by the endless snows of the Russian winter. At the same time, he also manages to communicate the terrible tensions of the time, both political and military, when imprisonment or even death can come at any moment.

**A.** At stations, food is purchased by barter. Zhivago's wife, Tonia, can exchange a beautiful towel, embroidered with cockerels, oxbows, and wheels, for half a roasted hare. Such were the relative values of goods in revolutionary times.

**B.** Also on the train are people who have been conscripted for heavy labor: rich, smart lawyers and stockbrokers. All of them have been classified as members of the formerly exploiting classes. They are side by side with floor polishers, rag pickers, and escaped lunatics.

**C.** In still other freight cars are soldiers with rifles and bandoliers of cartridges hanging over their shoulders and around their waists. No one argues with them when they take food from the station vendors without paying.

**D.** For Zhivago, the most memorable part of the journey occurs when snow blocks the tracks ahead. All civilian passengers are mobilized, and they shovel snow for three days. The view of the snow-packed valley and hills is caught magnificently in Pasternak's words.

**E.** On the other hand, when the weather changes, "the sky, drunk with spring and giddy with its fumes…let down clouds, drooping at the edges like felt…and rain leapt from them, warm, smelling of soil and sweat, and washing the last armor-plating of ice from the earth." It is clear that these words are poetry in prose, written by a powerful observer and inhabitant of nature.

**IV.** The estate in the beautiful countryside is a perfect place for Zhivago to work on his poems. Later, he goes into the small city of Yuriatin, where there is a library, and there, he sees Lara. Once again, Pasternak uses coincidence in a way that many readers consider farfetched and clumsy.

**A.** Zhivago still finds the energy and passion to enter into a liaison with Lara, thereby betraying his wife, Tonia. Zhivago's illicit affair does not last long, however, because he is kidnapped by horsemen.

**B.** The horsemen are part of the "Forest Brotherhood," a group of revolutionaries who are trying to wrest control of Siberia from the hands of the counter-revolutionary army of Whites. Their former doctor was killed, and now they force Zhivago to come with them and provide medical services.

**C.** Zhivago is forced to spend a year with these committed revolutionaries.

**D.** They are bloody and obsessive to a terrible extreme, with the constant repetition of clichés appropriate only to self-satisfied people. Their talk grates terribly on Zhivago's poetic sensibilities, yet he gives them loyal medical service and even a certain degree of human sympathy.

**E.** Zhivago finally manages to escape and return to Lara. Meanwhile, his family has left Siberia for Moscow. He then discovers that Lara, too, must leave; her presence has become politically dangerous. Her husband is a military man sought by the Red punishment organizations.

**F.** Zhivago is left almost completely on his own, eventually returning to a Moscow that has become Soviet and to a society that has no real place for him. He dies of a heart attack.

**V.** The cycle is complete. Zhivago has systematically separated himself, step by step, from any surrounding society in which he might have lived. He is separated from his classical Russian culture, from his family, from his friends, and from his passionate love. The novel defines the lot of the individual in a tragic and moving way.

**A.** Pasternak composed this novel in the midst of a society whose official ideology passionately dedicated itself to collectivism, deliberately ignoring the needs of countless thousands, even millions, of individuals.

**B.** At the end of the book are poems, ostensibly created by Zhivago. The second stanza of the first poem eloquently states Pasternak's identification of the individual both with Hamlet and with Christ:

*Na menia nastavlen sumrak nochi*
*Tysiach'iu binoklei na osi.*
*Esli tol'ko mozhno, Avva Otche,*
*Chashu etu mimo pronesi.*

The gloom of night is set upon me
With a thousand binoculars on an axis.
If it's only possible, Abba Father,
Take this cup past me.

And the closing lines of the poem state his view on his life:

> *Ia, odin, vse tonet v fariseistve.*
> *Zhizn' prozhit' – ne pole pereiti.*
>
> I am alone—everything is drowning among the Pharisees.
> To live life is not as simple as crossing a field.

*Doctor Zhivago* is a novel in prose written by one of the greatest poets of the 20th century.

**Suggested Reading:**

Victor Erlich, ed., *Pasternak: A Collection of Critical Essays*.

Ronald Hingley, *Pasternak: A Biography*.

Boris Pasternak, *Doctor Zhivago* (a novel and series of poems), with prose translated by Max Hayward and Manya Harari and poems translated by Bernard Guerney.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. In what ways does Pasternak see Russian nature, in all of its expansiveness, in the pages of *Doctor Zhivago*? Does this vision in any way relate to the political situation in Russia at that time?
2. Zhivago, like Pasternak, engages in two great love affairs, one with his wife, Tonia, and the other with his mistress, Lara. In what ways do these relationships define the character of the poet who represents Pasternak's idea of a strong individual personality living in a time that emphasizes collectivism?

# Lecture Thirty-Five
# Aleksandr Isaevich Solzhenitsyn, Born 1918

**Scope:** Up to the 1960s, the Soviet Union officially claimed that there were no slave labor camps in the USSR. The air was struck by a kind of lightning when, in 1962, a new work by a previously unknown high school math teacher took the world by storm. It was Solzhenitsyn's novella *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. Through the soft voice of an uneducated man from a provincial collective farm, now a prisoner in the GULAG (an abbreviation for labor camps, soon to become world famous), the reader becomes aware of the horrendous reality of Stalin's camps. Throughout its pages, the book reflects the mentality of a decent human being who deeply believes in producing good work no matter the circumstances. In many ways, the novel conforms to the shibboleths favored by the socialist regime. Yet its indictment of that same regime is crushing and, ultimately, lethal. Solzhenitsyn, subsequently in exile in New England, now back in a very different Russia, continues to write and speak in the voice of a prophet. Many in Russia look upon him today as the worn-out tribune of a long-gone time. I see him as the voice of Russian determination and strength.

## Outline

**I.** In the early 1960s, the name of Solzhenitsyn suddenly became world famous. A former high school math teacher, then a soldier in World War II, incarcerated in a forced labor camp for one of his letters intercepted by the KGB (security police), he wrote a movingly simple account of one day in a Soviet forced labor camp.

**A.** The manuscript fell into the hands of Tvardovsky, a popular Soviet poet and editor of the most liberal Soviet journal of that day. He was so impressed that he personally took it to Khrushchev, the Soviet premier. Khrushchev admitted that this account was one of the few literary works that he had managed to read without sticking himself with pins to avoid slumber. The resulting publication stunned the Soviet reading public and the world.

**B.** *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* views the Soviet penal world through the eyes of a former collective farm worker and soldier in World War II. The Nazi soldiers capture him, he escapes back to the Soviet lines, and the authorities arrest him and accuse him of being a spy. He experiences a fate common to thousands of other Soviet soldiers at that time.

**C.** In the camp, he meets many different kinds of people, many of them far more educated and/or experienced than he is. As he sees them, we get a sense of the population and its mores in this vast archipelago of camps (*Gulag Archipelago*), as Solzhenitsyn would later call it.

**D.** There is the captain, the former commander of a Soviet naval ship, who was arrested because he received a Christmas card from a former British sea captain, an ally during the war. This man cannot put up with the nonsense in the camp, nor can he keep silent. He ends up in a cold cell, in light clothing, with very little food or water. He will come out a cripple for life, if he survives at all.

**E.** There is a medic who examines Ivan. It turns out that he has no medical training at all. He is a poet who was arrested for his verse. The camp commander likes the verse, so he gives the man a lighter job on the inside, pretending to be a medic attending to the men. In this confinement, he can write poetry that would be immediately condemned on the outside.

**F.** There are two intellectuals from Moscow, whose educated Russian dialect Ivan can barely understand. He witnesses their polemic about films by the great Soviet cinematographer Sergei Eisenstein. The argument about esthetic judgment versus political decency goes way over Ivan's head. But he does bring them lunch.

**G.** These and many other characters come alive through Ivan's untutored observation. Their various views of the world and of the Soviet reality come through without any argument or discussion—Ivan is in no position to argue with them. Solzhenitsyn makes us believe that we are right there beside them. No amount of attempted dehumanization in the administration of the camp can take away their colorful individuality.

**II.** What impressed Khrushchev the most deeply—and it really is a powerful part of the story—is Ivan's devotion to his work on the camp's construction project.

**A.** We cannot forget that Ivan is working on a building that will be part of a prison to confine him and others like him, yet this purpose does not seem to enter Ivan's consciousness. He simply gives all his attention and effort to laying bricks properly, even though the Siberian cold is so intense that it freezes the mortar almost before he can apply it to his part of the wall.

**B.** To keep the construction shack warm, the prisoners must improvise some kind of covering for the windows. Ivan and one of his fellow prisoners decide to snatch a roll of heavy felt from piles belonging to another gang. With great dexterity and boldness, they manage to make the heist and bring the roll of felt, kept vertical between them, back to their shack.

**C.** Later on, a man from the camp administration discovers their larceny and threatens to inform on them. He is almost immediately surrounded by prisoners wielding heavy shovels and warned what they will do to him if he plays the snitching game. He gets the message, but fast! The prisoners know well the importance of solidarity in the midst of their suffering. Seldom does poetic justice taste so sweet as it does in this scene.

**D.** When the actual bricklaying begins, Ivan finds himself totally absorbed. It seems safe to assume that most readers are not professional layers of brick, yet the details of the process become almost immediately clear. Ivan knows what it means to do a good job, and he is determined to do it. The errors and clumsiness of some of his fellow prisoners simply make him find ways to compensate.

**E.** He works so intently that he pays no attention to quitting time. All the others are ready to leave the job, but Ivan keeps going so as not to waste the mortar, which will freeze if he leaves it. He secures his trowel so he will have it the next day, and he even cannot resist a last knowing look at the work he has just completed—he knows high-quality work when he sees it!

**F.** When Ivan finally joins the others who are ready to leave the worksite, he finds the men and guards in an uproar: A man is

missing. The guards know that they will pay a heavy price if they come back one man short, and there is real panic.

**G.** It turns out that a Bulgarian prisoner had found a warm spot for himself and had gone to sleep. When the guards roughly bring him back to the group, the other prisoners turn against him. They call him a spy—a genuine spy—not one like them, who had merely been convicted as such! The poor fellow was lucky to get off with a blow on the neck by Tiurin, the gang boss, who by that gesture saved the Bulgarian from much worse treatment from the other prisoners.

**H.** The contrast between Ivan's honest concentration on his work and the phoney nature of the accusations about spying only intensifies the central argument of Solzhenitsyn's tale: It is impossible to turn human beings completely away from the best parts of their humanity.

**III.** When the men return to the camp, we see the last hours of the one day mentioned in the title. The men have but one bit of time to call their own.

**A.** At the entrance to the camp, the guards are waiting to frisk the returning men. Ivan suddenly remembers that he has a piece of steel that he picked up at the worksite. He can use it to make a small knife, but if the guard finds it, he will be in trouble. Cleverly, he presents himself before the guard least likely to search him thoroughly and manages to hold on to his treasure. Such are the small victories in the camp.

**B.** The one discordant note is struck when the camp administrator comes to take the former naval captain to the freezing cell, just at the moment when the unfortunate man is enjoying a bit of food donated from the outside. The fellow prisoners try to buck him up for the ordeal, but there is not much they can say.

**C.** Yet the story ends on a positive note. Ivan thinks over the events of the day, including the pleasure he took in the work. He had gotten extra food, he had successfully brought in the piece of steel, and he had gotten some tobacco. The day, in the midst of this terrible camp, had been almost happy. And there were more than 3,000 such days in his sentence.

**D.** In a simple, quiet way, Solzhenitsyn makes a more eloquent statement about the hideous Stalinist, so-called socialist, camps than the loudest and most passionate public denunciations could possibly have done. And he preserves the total humanity of the prisoners.

**IV.** Largely on the basis of this work and its enormous resonance both in Russia and around the world, Solzhenitsyn became a kind of universal celebrity in the 1960s and 1970s. He was awarded the Nobel Prize, for which the Soviet government would not let him travel to the acceptance ceremony. His voice was heard most strongly when his own government tried to stifle it.

**A.** In this period, he wrote increasingly open criticism of Soviet policy. He telephoned Andropov, who was then head of the KGB and later became premier of the country. On the phone, he actually told Andropov that he, Solzhenitsyn, was declaring war on the KGB; his fighting troops would be his books, including some still-secret manuscripts, which he threatened to release abroad at a strategic time.

**B.** Solzhenitsyn's words became increasingly bold or, perhaps, increasingly self-destructive, depending on one's point of view. He wrote a book called *The Calf That Butted Its Head Against the Oak Tree*, describing his own position in the USSR at that time. It gives a wonderful picture of how it felt to be an intellectual in that most anti-intellectual time and place.

**C.** Finally came the inevitable arrest. In his first-ever trip in an airplane, Solzhenitsyn expected to travel eastward, to Siberia. Instead, he could see that the plane was traveling westward. He was dumped at a Swiss airport. Solzhenitsyn was in exile; the Soviet government obviously thought it unwise to incarcerate or to execute him.

**D.** For more than 15 years, Solzhenitsyn chose to live in Vermont, where he worked diligently on volumes describing details of the forced labor camps and his version of the history that produced the revolutions of 1917.

**E.** To the shock of some, he publicly criticized American foreign policy and derided what he considered the utterly frivolous nature of American life, a subject about which he obviously knew very little and made no attempts to learn.

**F.** After 1991 and the collapse of the Soviet Union, he agreed to return home if the authorities would agree to publish all his works and issue an apology for his unjust exile. They agreed to his conditions, and he has been living in Russia since that time.

**G.** What must be remembered is Solzhenitsyn's courage in the face of overwhelming odds. He stood for truth and decency in an indecent time.

**Suggested Reading:**

Michael Scammell, *Solzhenitsyn: A Biography*.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, authorized translation by H. T. Willetts, with an introduction and commentary by Katherine Shonk.

D. M. Thomas, *Alexander Solzhenitsyn. A Century in His Life*.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. Solzhenitsyn's story is told through the eyes and ears of Ivan Denisovich, a simple, uneducated man from a collective farm. Yet the many different characters, including the sophisticated intellectuals, come across vividly and convincingly. How does Solzhenitsyn manage this effect in such a short space?
2. The final lines about the experience having been a "good day" come across with striking irony. How does the author manage to convince us that human beings could possibly see this as a "good day"?

# Lecture Thirty-Six
# The Many Colors of Russian Literature

**Scope:** In the course of these lectures, we have come a considerable way together: We have traveled over 1,000 years, from early Kiev in the 9th century through the Soviet Union of the 20th century. We have seen how the early adoption of Eastern Orthodox Christianity, together with the continuation of the pre-Christian oral Slavic tradition, existed side by side in the 10th through the 12th centuries in the territory around Kiev. We then skipped forward to the early 19th century and saw how these disparate traditions came together in the Golden Age of Russian Literature. After consideration of the various trends manifest in the most famous period of Russian literature, we then moved forward to the 20th century and the era of Soviet culture. As we looked at the central issues of the literature that came out of the USSR, we saw how Russian literature redirected its notions about the eternal questions. And now we can look back on the territory traversed, hoping that these considerations and descriptions will help us to think ever more deeply about ourselves and the world, spurred on by the stimulus of Russian literature.

## Outline

**I.** We have now given some consideration to three widely separated periods in the history of Russian literature.

**A.** We have examined samples of artistic creation from the 10th through the 13th centuries in the time of Kievan Rus'. We have then gone to the 19th and early 20th centuries to examine some of the brightest highlights of the Russian Golden Age. Giving some brief consideration to the transition between tsarist and Soviet Russia, we then entered the time of the USSR, covering most of the 20th century.

**B.** Again, we had to pick and choose. Necessarily, we omitted some important figures, but we did get some idea of the various contending points of view and ways of turning human experience into artistic expression. Let's take a bird's-eye view of where we have been and what we have learned.

**II.** The Kievan era of artistic creativity was represented by two different tendencies, expressed in two different languages. One of them, today called Church Slavic, was a language and an alphabet developed through religious documents, almost all of which were received through translation from Eastern Christian Byzantium.

**A.** These documents included magnificently moving translations of parts of the Old and the New Testaments. The dramatic familial and political relationships of the formerly Hebrew manuscripts were taken in their full breadth, giving both the patriarchal fire of Abraham and the sure, religiously political hand of David. The didactic effectiveness of Jesus and his struggles with the demonic forces in life also found their full reflection in the Russian imagination and in its later literature.

**B.** There was also a full range of patristic literature, describing the lives of the Christian saints and their efforts to live lives worthy of the God-Man whom they worshipped. His Greek name was Jesus, with its close Slavic approximation *Isus*. Later, there would be terrible fights over whether to spell his name with one letter *i* or two: *Isus* or *Iisus*.

**C.** There were those, such as the widely admired brothers Boris and Gleb, who thought that true Christians should not take full part in this world but should live entirely separate from this one. There were others who thought that true Christians should struggle for the ideals of Jesus in this world, using the power of the state where necessary. This philosophical division continued to appear far into the future of Russian literature, especially in the work of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky.

**D.** In contrast to the literature of the Church, there existed a rich oral tradition, whose roots went far back into pre-Christian times and values. Expressed in vernacular language, these works described a land and a nature boiling with emotions and forces with which human beings could struggle, but not always, or even often, successfully.

**E.** This vernacular tradition is most powerfully represented in the medieval epic *The Tale of Prince Igor*, which presents some notion of the old Slavic gods. The tale also gives a charming notion, impressive in its power, of the feminine spirit very much alive

among the Slavic tribes. Iaroslavna, Igor's independent and loyal wife, provides a fine example of feminine strength to later writers.

**F.** East Slavic and later Russian folklore in the vernacular language also offer a picture of a dynamic world, peopled with ardent young men and lovely women, who encounter all kinds of devils, both from the pre-Christian and Christian vocabularies. These devils conjure up human passions, including the Russian love for horses, into whose forms humans can be changed almost instantly. The demons also can be called up by wizards and magicians. What a storehouse of characters for later Russian writers!

**III.** We then took the long leap of 600 years—from the 13th century to the 19th. This leap does not imply that there was nothing of worth written in the intervening period but, rather, reflects the need to stay within the time limits of the course and still gain some idea of the ancient traditions alive in the context of Russian literature. The Golden Age of Russian Literature and even the Soviet era both show influences inherited from a much earlier time.

**IV.** The originator of the Golden Age, and the person who played the largest individual role in shaping the powerful modern Russian literary language, was Pushkin, to whom we gave considerable attention.

**A.** He established the crystal-clear school of Russian literature, with a sense of rhythm and sound seldom paralleled by any other writer. His use of themes became paradigmatic for Russian writers who followed him, and his name is virtually hallowed in his country.

**B.** From history and politics to passion and love, there is hardly a topic Pushkin did not cover with passion and intelligence. It is a shame that difficulty of translation makes it hard for Westerners to appreciate his work. Luckily, great composers have been available to make some of his sounds ring in the ears of those who do not know Russian.

**V.** Gogol', part of whose life overlapped that of Pushkin, initiated a different kind of literature.

**A.** His language was much more highly decorated, much more involved with fanciful and original images, often going over the border from humor into a powerful version of the grotesque. He well appreciated the power and attraction of the demonic.

**B.** His devils come to the boil quickly, and his humor draws us through a fantasy of the Russian countryside, as well as through the contorted minds of his characters.We had the chance to view some of his remarkable prose and see the various slopes of his not entirely sane mind and spirit. Many critics consider him the most Russian of all the writers.

**VI.** Our longest gaze rested on Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, the most widely known and appreciated giants of the Russian literary tradition. Students, beleaguered by mountainous details of Russian literary history and/or grammar, often call them "Tolstoevsky," a kind of literary Siamese twinning of geniuses. Unquestionably, even in the minds of critics hostile to these writers' works and styles, their novels and short stories offer a towering presence of spiritual and artistic power.

**A.** Dostoevsky, both by his extraordinarily dramatic life and his power of argumentation, draws us in (or repels us) with titanic force.

**1.** His exploration of the eternal themes, stemming from Kievan times to our day, pressed the edges of human experience.

**2.** The power of human love and hate; the nature of morality, whether controlled or not; the basis for human and divine law; the existence or nonexistence of divinity; the presence of the diabolical in human affairs; the nature of politics—all of these things and much more are followed through the passions of human beings who seem to know all of our most closely guarded secrets.

**B.** Tolstoy presents us with a universe that, in some ways, seems to vie with God's own universe. From aristocrats to peasants, from Russians to people who come from many different cultures and languages, from foxes and wolves to horses and bears—and each one of his animals has a different personality and some even speak—all are brought to life with a sorcerer's magical wand.

**C.** Tolstoy's prose is simple and direct, the syntax much more straightforward than that of Dostoevsky, yet he makes the reader feel all the complexity of life and human psychology. This reader has never known an aristocrat personally, yet I feel that I know Prince Andrei and Count Pierre and Countess Natasha as well as I know any personal acquaintance.

**VII.** Turgenev draws us in by the fine, sometimes delicate, way he presents his people, their environment, and even their pets. We hear distinctly the claws of the greyhound tapping the fine parquet floor of a tastefully built Russian country house. In that tapping, we sense the rituals of afternoon tea of the inhabitants in the house.

**A.** Turgenev tried to deal with the political issues of his day, with a hope for a better, more humane country. He often found himself between two stools in the large political arguments, and he lacked the strength, sometimes, to hold his own or to fight his way out.

**B.** Few people had a finer sense of that magnificent language of Russian, and even fewer had his generosity of spirit, even when confronted by the literary giants among whom he lived.

**VIII.** Chekhov was probably the most subtle of the Russian writers. Known most widely and popularly in the West as a dramatist, his plays tread the fine border between comedy and tragedy.

**A.** He calls his first and last plays comedies, but the humor is very sly and connected with events and human fates that are anything but funny. His work certainly reflects a sensitive artist, also a medical doctor, who looks at the world through eyes that cannot be fooled by human pretense.

**B.** His exquisite short stories also catch human situations in a way that precludes all of our normal deceptions. He, the descendant of a serf, consciously squeezed the slavery out of his own soul.

**IX.** By the end of the 1890s, we have left the Golden Age behind, and various groups are struggling to capture the attention of the Russian reading public.

**A.** We have not had time to deal with the so-called Silver Age, from the 1890s to World War I, which produced some very good poetry, a new kind of prose, and many innovative, creative ideas about art and literature.

**B.** In the midst of these polemics, one heard the arguments of the revolutionary Marxists, who had their own ideas about the proper place and social tasks of literature and art. The polemics took on a much fiercer tone after the Bolshevik Revolution and rise to power in October–November of 1917.

**C.** At that point, the famous eternal questions became more directly connected with politics and the problems of administering a state with a total ideological plan for all aspects of the country, most especially for literature and art.

**X.** The most famous pre-revolutionary writer who became closely associated with the Bolsheviks and the Soviet government was M. Gorky.

**A.** Indeed, in the long run, his reputation among intelligent readers was greatly harmed by the continual heavy-handed Soviet propaganda touting him as the "great proletarian writer." Furthermore, Gorky himself sometimes added to the damage by some of his impulsive and raucus political phrases.

**B.** Yet his very best writing showed a wonderful mastery of the Russian language and its richly varied popular usages. The Bolshevik regime also carefully concealed his many efforts, no small number of them successful, to protect both human life and human creative endeavor from the repressive excesses of the Soviet government, especially in its early years.

**XI.** Maiakovsky was the most talented writer to offer his gifts enthusiastically to the Bolsheviks.

**A.** Calling himself the Tribune of the Revolution, he produced both poetry and posters to support the ideology and program of socialism, and these works often had fresh and interesting esthetic innovations.

**B.** Later, he became increasingly disillusioned, and his suicide produced real trauma among lovers of Russian culture.

**XII.** Sholokhov often saw the world through the eyes of the Cossacks, and his judgments sometimes lacked the balance of the more classically educated intellectuals.

**A.** His major novel was a real artistic achievement: Few people so successfully communicated the emotional experience of living through the day-to-day events and the shifting political winds of the revolution.

**B.** His reputation among intelligent readers was badly marred by his urging the execution of some dissident literary critics, but Russians still read his novel.

**XIII.** Zoshchenko dealt with the Soviet world through humor and parody.

**A.** A master of the everyday Russian language as it was swiftly changing (purists would say degenerating) under the pressure of Soviet life, he pictured the often unsung strength of those who had to bear the brunt of the daily struggle.

**B.** His popularity was genuine—not the result of an overactive state propaganda machine. He is highly regarded today, and artifacts connected with his life are greatly valued.

**XIV.** Pasternak was one of the finest poets of the 20th century.

**A.** His gift for poetic translation, including plays by Shakespeare, was virtually unmatched.

**B.** His reputation as a novelist only increased after the Soviet propaganda machine attacked him with scandalous and false accusations. His voice as a lone poet among crowds of insensitive people made itself heard and felt around the world.

**XV.** Solzhenitsyn startled both the Soviet Union and the world when his short novel punctured the official Soviet claim that the USSR had no penal labor camps.

**A.** Despite terrible political and police pressures, he maintained his position as witness to the truth.Threats of incarceration and execution did not move him, and actual exile only deepened his resolve to speak as a prophet.

**B.** Despite many contemporary claims that his is a voice of the past, his ideas endure. He represents a stubbornness that is truly Russian!

**XVI.** And there you have it! We have completed a gallop through Russian literature from the days of early Kiev through the 20th century.

**A.** There can be no claims of completeness or exhaustiveness—no small number of good writers and fine works have been skipped—Russian literature is a deep and expansive ocean! But I hope you have received a stimulating impression of the vast spiritual and artistic wealth of this magnificent language and culture.

**B.** If these words help you to ponder and to read some of the works—with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might—the goal of the lectures will have been achieved.

**C.** Where else will you find such a collection of great writers and souls? One might answer: only in the greatest epochs of world literature—from the Bible and the ancient Greeks through all of European (and, probably, Asian) history. I can only quote from parts of Turgenev's famous poem in prose:

> *Vo dni tiagostnykh razdumii o sud'bakh moei rodiny—ty odin mne podderzhka i opora, o velikii, moguchii, pravdivyi i svobodnyi russkii iazyk …. No nel'zia verit' chtoby takoi iazyk ne byl dan velikomu narodu!*
>
> In the heaviest days of despair about the fate of my native land—you alone are my helper and supporter, oh great, mighty, truth-bearing, and freedom-giving Russian language…. It's impossible to believe that such a language was not given to a great people!

**Suggested Reading:**

Edward J. Brown, *Literature Since the Revolution*.

D. S. Mirsky, *A History of Russian Literature*, edited by Francis J. Whitfield.

Charles Moser, ed., *Cambridge History of Russian Literature*.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. Should Soviet literature be considered a continuation of the Russian tradition, or should it be considered a destruction of the previous culture?
2. Some critics claim that Russian literature is too heavily burdened with strong emotion, even sentimentality. Is this correct? What specific works support your opinion? Are there works that oppose your opinion?

## Timeline

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| 863 | Cyril and Methodius devise an alphabet for a common Slavic language. |
| 988 | Prince Vladimir brings Byzantine Christianity to Kiev. |
| 1185 | Kievan epic poem "The Lay of the Host of Prince Igor" is composed. |
| 1237–1240 | Tatar heirs of Genghis Khan conquer Kiev; the "Tatar yoke" begins and lasts more than 200 years. |
| 1547 | Ivan IV ("the Terrible") is crowned as the first "tsar" in Moscow. |
| 1703 | Peter I orders construction of St. Petersburg, to be the capital of his empire. |
| 1799 | Birth of Aleksandr Pushkin, Russia's greatest poet. |
| 1811 | Aleksandr I establishes the Lycée, which educates Pushkin and a brilliant group of contemporaries. |
| 1812 | The Napoleonic armies invade Russia. |
| 1815 | The Russian army, with many French-speaking officers, occupies Paris. |
| 1825 | Decembrist Uprising (includes friends of Pushkin) in St. Petersburg. |
| 1837 | Pushkin's duel with D'Anthès results in the poet's death. |
| 1842 | Gogol's *Dead Souls* leads to wide fame for the author. |

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| 1845 | Dostoevsky's first novel, *Poor Folk*, creates instant fame for the young author. |
| 1849 | Arrest and sentencing of Dostoevsky, ostensibly to execution, actually to shackled Siberian imprisonment. |
| 1852 | Death of Gogol', as he lay with leeches hanging from his nose. |
| 1854–1855 | Crimean War, disastrous for Russia, with one exception: It provided material for Tolstoy's first published work, *Tales of Sevastopol'*. |
| 1856 | Death of Tsar Nikolai I; ascension to the throne of Aleksandr II, most liberal of all Russian tsars. |
| 1859 | Dostoevsky, released from Siberian exile, returns to European Russia. |
| 1860s | Most liberal and creative time in tsarist Russian culture and politics. |
| 1861 | Liberation of Russian serfs, a huge majority of Russia's Slavic population. |
| 1862 | Beginning of great polemical novels, including Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, and resulting polemics between liberals and conservatives. |
| 1866 | Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. |
| 1865–1869 | Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. |
| 1876–1877 | Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*; polemics arise over issues of women's rights and their rightful position in Russian society. |

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| 1881 | Dostoevsky's final novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, followed shortly by the author's death. |
| 1881 | Tsar Aleksandr killed by a revolutionary terrorist's bomb; succeeded by his son, Aleksandr III, a far more conservative ruler. |
| 1880s | Growing political unrest in Russia, with resulting violence and corresponding acts of governmental repression. |
| 1882–1885 | Series of repressive, often bloody acts of violence; pogroms against religious minorities, particularly against Jews; dissension within the government about how to deal with them. |
| 1891 | Unexpected death of Aleksandr III; ascension to the throne of his son, Nikolai II, a young man not well prepared to rule the country. |
| 1892 | End of the Golden Age of Russian Literature; proclamations of new trends in Russian literature, away from realism, and away from Romanticism in Russian music. |
| 1892 | Maxim Gorky begins to attract attention as the voice of the urban lower classes, previously unrepresented in Russian literature. |
| 1896 | Chekhov's play *The Seagull*, after a disastrous performance in St. Petersburg, becomes a great success in Moscow, thanks to Stanislavsky's direction at the Moscow Art Theatre; Chekhov and Stanislavsky become a worldwide theatrical force. |

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| 1901 | Nascent political parties begin to take on form in literature: Marxist group expresses radical ideas; group of poets and writers concentrates on aesthetic issues; conservative group feels frightened by strong changes taking place in Russian life and culture. |
| 1901 | Tolstoy, around whom a group of pacifist and reforming Christians had formed, is excommunicated from the Russian Orthodox Church. |
| 1903 | Large and violent anti-Jewish pogrom, in the southern city of Kishinev, observed and condemned around the world; Tolstoy claims it is a result of government policy, not an expression of popular Russian feeling. |
| 1904 | Death of Chekhov abroad; his body brought back to Russia in a freight car marked "fresh oysters"; described by Gorky. |
| 1904–1905 | Russo-Japanese War is disaster for Russia, large part of Russia's navy sunk; calls for reform result in tsarist manifesto granting some elected representation in the government. |
| 1905 | First Marxist political uprising to establish a socialist state; put down by tsarist police; arrest and exile of Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin. |
| 1906 | Gorky's disastrous visit to the United States—thrown out of a New York hotel for traveling with his mistress. |
| 1906–1913 | Large emigré groups of anti-tsarist Russian politicians and revolutionaries |

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| | active in Western Europe and the United States. |
| 1910 | Tolstoy runs away from famous country home at Iasnaia Poliana and dies in a railway stationmaster's room; church refuses Christian prayers at funeral; buried in famous grave at home estate. |
| 1914 | Beginning of World War I; agrarian Russia, with little help from England and France, fights industrialized powers of Germany and Austria/Hungary; some initial successes against Austrian army, soon overborne by huge losses of soldiers in battles against Germans. |
| February/March 1917 | Popular uprisings against tsar result in abdication of Nikolai II; a range of Russian political parties clumsily tries to govern through parliament (Duma). |
| October/November 1917 | Bolshevik party, led by Lenin and Trotsky, takes power through successful coup d'état, ostensibly in the name of the working class; legislative body called *Soviet* ("council") forms. |
| 1918 | New Bolshevik government signs peace treaty with Kaiser's Germany, ceding many Western territories to foe. |
| 1918–1922 | Bloody civil war within the territory of the previous Russian Empire, eventuating a new state called the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics; government determined to bring on socialism quickly and thoroughly; period called "War Communism." |
| 1920–1922 | Huge number of intellectuals and artists find it very difficult to work under the Soviets; they undergo repression; many |

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| | emigrate to Western Europe and the United States; Gorky, who had been close to Lenin, among them. |
| 1923–1928 | A period of ideological retrenchment, when government pulls back some of its forces under a program called the New Economic Policy (NEP); political police force ("Cheka") remains in power. |
| 1924 | Death of Lenin; beginning of a bloody struggle for power within the USSR. |
| 1920s | Many literary and cultural movements struggle for position under the Soviet regime; Maiakovsky lays claim to the title of Revolution's Tribune; Sholokhov begins to write a major novel about the fate of the Cossacks; Zoshchenko observes it all with a sharp eye for parody and humor. |
| 1928–1929 | Consolidation of Stalin's power; beginning of collectivization of Soviet agriculture; beginning of five-year plans for the whole Soviet society. |
| 1928–1933 | Gorky returns to USSR; works with Soviet authorities to establish central line in literature and culture: socialist realism. |
| 1930 | Suicide of Maiakovsky sends shock wave among Soviet writers. |
| 1933–1934 | Millions of deaths from starvation resulting from clumsy and crude policies connected with collectivization of agriculture. |

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| 1936 | Death of Gorky; beginning of mass Stalinist purges—widespread arrests and millions of deaths. |
| 1933–1940 | Pasternak, like many other poets and writers, concentrates on artistic translations and works, which keeps him out of political trouble. |
| 1939 | Stalin and Hitler sign the Pact of Mutual Assistance; World War II begins with occupation of western Poland by Nazi Germany and eastern Poland by the Soviet Union; soon, Soviets also occupy Baltic countries. |
| 1941 | Nazi invasion of the USSR and Soviet alliance with England and free France; soon followed by alliance with the United States. |
| 1945 | Allied victory over Nazi Germany; hopes for a peaceful, cooperative postwar world defeated by the growing reality of the Cold War between the East and West. |
| 1946 | Soviet government publicly attacks Zoshchenko, together with other highly respected cultural figures; postwar policy of cultural repression begins in earnest. |
| 1953 | Death of Stalin; hopes for some easement in cultural policy. |
| 1956 | Khrushchev's famous speech denounces some of Stalin's crimes; release of millions of political prisoners from forced labor camps. |

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| 1958–1964 | "The Thaw," new policy under Khrushchev, allows slightly more freedom for literature. |
| 1958 | Publication abroad of Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*; awarded Nobel Prize; author forced to turn it down. |
| 1962 | Khrushchev authorizes publication of Solzhenitsyn's novel describing a day in one of the Soviet forced labor camps, whose existence had previously been officially denied. |
| 1964 | Khrushchev peacefully removed from power and allowed to live; among intellectuals, continuing hopes for gradually increasing freedom. |
| 1968 | Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia; end of intellectuals' hopes for increasing feeedom. |
| 1970s and early 1980s | Era under the leadership of Brezhnev, who held back threats of governmental terror but kept a tight public rein on freedom; era of covert self-publishing (*samizdat*) on typewriters with many carbon copies. |
| 1974 | Solzhenitsyn is expelled from the Soviet Union; his residence becomes Vermont in the United States. |
| 1985 | Gorbachev comes to power with slogans of restructuring and open public expression of opinion. |
| 1991 | End of the Soviet Union after attempted *putsch*; proclamation of a new Russian Federal Republic, free from one-party control. |

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| 1994 | Solzhenitsyn returns to the new Russian Republic. |
| 2000 | Election of Putin as president of the Russian Republic; new policy of consolidating power; wide and free expression of public opinion remains. |

# Glossary

**Bolshevik**: Literally, "member of the majority," the faction of the Russian Marxist Revolutionary Party under Lenin's leadership that sought and achieved a violent uprising to overthrow the Russian monarchy and establish a socialist state.

**Cap of Monomakh**: Headpiece presumably worn by a famous prince of Kiev, Vladimir Monomakh, during his coronation. Later, the tsars used the cap at their own coronation ceremonies.

**Church Slavic**: Written form of the language used by all Slavic peoples during the 9th century. The language received an alphabet devised by the brothers Cyril and Methodius, Christian monks and professors at the University of Constantinople. Church Slavic is now used in prayer services in the Slavic branches of the Eastern Orthodox Christian Church.

**Cossack**: Originally runaway serfs in the 15th and 16th centuries, the Cossacks formed their own independent territory. In the 17th century, they signed a treaty of alliance with the Muscovite tsar and became the crack cavalry troops of the Russian army.

**Cyrillic alphabet**: Alphabet constructed some decades after the death of St. Cyril (869), using some Greek and some Roman letters, plus a few derived from other sources. It accurately reflects, with few exceptions, the phonetics of the Russian language even today.

**Decembrist Uprising (1825)**: A group of aristocrats, many of whom were officers in the Russian army when it occupied Paris right after Napoleon's fall, naively hoped to bring a parliamentary republic to Russia after a political coup in St. Petersburg with almost no support from the population at large.

***dvoeverie***: Literally "two faiths intermixed." In the late 10th century, when Vladimir, prince of Kiev, returned with the Eastern Orthodox Christian faith, he decreed that the population should become Christian. Under pressure, people agreed, although large numbers of peasants retained elements of the old faith for many centuries. These elements eventually found their ways into Christianity.

**Eastern Slavs**: People who, in the 10th century, spoke a dialect of the common Slavic language. As the centuries went by, their dialects developed into the Eastern Slavic languages: Russian, White Russian, and Ukrainian.

**Forest Brotherhood and the White Army**: The Forest Brotherhood is typical of the groups that fought in Siberia to establish Soviet control over the region. The White Army was organized by a wide coalition of parties that did not want to live under the Soviet regime. The Whites included a wide range of political opinions, from traditional monarchists to democratic parties that wanted to establish a Russian parliamentary democracy.

**futurists, imagists, acmeists**: Groups of poets who used new kinds of artistic effects deemed revolutionary. Such artistic developments continued through much of the 1920s, only to be quashed in the Stalinist crackdown of the 1930s.

**GULAG**: Russian abbreviation for the State Administration of (Forced Labor) Camps (*Gosudarstvennoe Upravlenie Lagerei*). Solzhenitsyn's novel saw such camps as a huge archipelago spread throughout the USSR.

***infernal'nitsa***: Literally, "infernal woman." Dostoevsky used the term to describe his notion of the woman who controlled men by her violent and attractive passions.

**inspector general**: The Russian Empire covered an enormous territory, with many different peoples and ethnic groups. Communication and transportation were slow, often requiring weeks. When news of local malfeasance reached St. Petersburg, the authorities would often send out such a seasoned inspector to analyze the local situation and root out the trouble.

***iurodivyi***: Often rendered as "a fool in Christ"; such a person, often a poor wanderer, would mouth expressions that would seem senseless, although they supposedly contained great depth and holiness. Such people enjoyed great respect among East Slavic peasants, and the holy fools could often safely say things that others would not dare to express.

**kenotic saint**: In Greek, *kenosis* literally means "emptying out"; in one of Paul's epistles, Jesus empties himself out of godliness and takes on the form of a suffering human being. The kenotic saints tried to emulate Jesus and would never resist evil with violence.

**KGB**: Literally, "Committee for State Security" (*Komitet Gosudarstvennoi Bezopasnosti*). Successor to previous political police groups, the KGB acquired the reputation, well deserved, for repressive, rigorous, sometimes murderous action against all opponents to the regime, as well as those who *might* become opponents of the regime.

**Moscow Art Theatre**: Founded by Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko to reform what they regarded as worn-out conventions of the theater. The theater acquired a worldwide reputation and enormous prestige, closely connected with the work of Chekhov and Gorky.

**novella (Russian: *povest'*)**: A work of literary prose, longer than a short story but shorter than a novel. The Russian writers of the 19th century developed the form to a high artistic level.

**Optina Pustyn'**: Famous monastery in 19th-century Russia, to which many troubled people went in search of help from its famous church elders, who were perceptive psychologists. A certain Father Amvrosii evidently brought great help and care to the troubled Dostoevsky. Many of the priest's words turn up on the lips of Father Zosima in Dostoevsky's last novel.

**Polovetsians**: National group who occupied a territory to the south and east of the 13th-century East Slavs. Despite the fact that the Polovetsians were allies, an East Slavic armed force, under the leadership of Prince Igor, tried to conquer them, with disastrous military results (but good literature for the East Slavs).

**Rus'**: Territory extending in all directions from the city of Kiev in the 10th through the 12th centuries. Rus' was established by the East Slavs and produced the cultural basis for the Russian form of Eastern Orthodox Christianity.

**serf**: East Slavic agricultural peasants were forced into slavery, or serfdom, from the end of the 15th through the middle of the 19th centuries. A serf was subject to the authority of aristocratic landowners, backed by the power of the tsar.

**soul**: Russian popular and legal term used to refer to a serf (*dusha*); an aristocrat's economic status was often measured by how many souls he or she possessed.

**Tatars**: Turkic-speaking people who spread westward from the edges of Mongolia through the territories of the Slavs in the 14th and 15th centuries.

They possessed a military and economic technology very advanced for that time. Their military power was nearly invincible, and they ruled over Slavic territories for more than 200 years.

***troika***: Vehicle attached to three horses, whose positions were arranged in a way to obtain the maximum possible speed. For many centuries, it was the fastest available vehicle, especially useful in the vast expanses of the Russian Empire. The word—literally, "the three of them"—is often used to indicate a triumvirate, a powerful combination of three elements, or a playing card with the number 3.

# Biographical Notes

Biographies are provided for those whose lives are not already described in the lectures. These people, mainly historical political figures, with the addition of the French writer Stendhal, played very important roles in the development of Russian literature.

**Aleksandr II** (1818–1881). Most liberal and open of all the tsars. Under his regime, the serfs were liberated, and writers and intellectuals found it much easier to express their views in the 1860s and 1870s. Radicals arranged to kill him with a bomb in 1881 because they believed his reforms did not go far enough.

**Aleksandr III** (1845–1894). A much more repressive and conservative ruler than Aleksandr II, his reputation among the liberals and reformers was bad because he tried to preserve order by highly repressive means. Yet he was a great patron of the arts and of intellectual life.

**Khrushchev, Nikita Sergeevich** (1894–1971). Politician who maneuvered successfully under Stalin and managed to win out in the succeeding power struggle after the dictator's death. He was responsible for a mild anti-Stalinist liberalization called "The Thaw," and he was also responsible for the bloody repression of uprisings in communist East Germany and Hungary. Mercurial and dramatic in temperament, he captured the imagination of the world and inspired the caricatures of its most prominent cartoonists.

**Lenin** (pseudonym for Vladimir Il'ich Ul'anov, 1870–1924). Brother of an executed revolutionary and founder of the Bolshevik faction of the Communist Party. He was a politician of inexorable will and aggressiveness, who presided over the Bolshevik Revolution and the first year of the young Soviet regime. A would-be assassin's bullet did not kill him but undoubtedly shortened his life.

**Nikolai II** (1868–1918). Last of the Romanov dynasty, he tried to continue the conservative policies of his father, Aleksandr III, but he lacked the stern will and strength of his predecessors. He foolishly allowed himself to be drawn into World War I, and he agonized over the breakdown of the traditional Russian social order. The democratic parties deposed him, but the later Bolshevik government exiled him to the Urals and then butchered him, together with his whole family and retinue.

**Stalin** (pseudonym for Iosif Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili, 1879–1953). Born in the Caucasus and educated in an Eastern Orthodox Christian seminary, he rose to power as an efficient and wily executor of Lenin's directives and used his position to gain control of the Soviet bureaucracy and the whole government and society. Absolutely ruthless in crushing and killing all possible opponents (and many non-opponents), he successfully administered a defeat to Hitler by means of the most bloody possible tactics. Over time, his regime also murdered close to 20 million Soviet citizens. He inspired both extraordinarily wide reverence and immeasurably deep hatred among his subjects.

**Stendhal** (pseudonym for Mari Henri Beyle, 1783–1842). French writer who served in Napoleon's army, which invaded Russia. Throughout his life, Stendhal retained a love for Napoleon, which plunged him into political hot water during the French restoration. Despite his attraction to the invader of their country, Russian writers, especially Tolstoy, found Stendhal's work and approach to life both compatible and inspiring. He, in turn, greatly admired the Russian aristocracy.

**Sviatoslavich, Igor** (1151–1202). Protagonist of the East Slavic medieval epic poem *The Tale of Prince Igor*. He led an army against the Polovician (sometimes called "Kuman") khan, Konchak, with whom he had previously arranged an alliance. He was defeated and his army was destroyed. He managed to escape, and his son married the daughter of the khan.

**Sviatoslavich, Vladimir** (son of Sviatoslav, d. 1015). Prince of Kiev who married the sister of the Byzantine emperor and brought Christianity to Kiev and the Eastern Slavs; considered a saint by the Russian Orthodox Church.

**Trotsky** (pseudonym for Lev Davidovich Bronstein, 1879–1940). Powerful orator and writer who lent his considerable talents to the Bolshevik uprising and presided over the formation of the victorious Red Army. He was unable to resist the rise of Stalin and went into exile, ending up in a fortress in Mexico. His later writing castigated Stalin and his regime. He became the victim of an assassin's alpine axe, which was guided by Stalin's political police.

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———. “The Bronze Horseman,” in *Pushkin Threefold.* Translated by Walter Arndt (bilingual edition). New York: E. P. Dutton, 1972. This translator totally captures Pushkin’s rhythm and rhyme schemes, necessarily changing many of the words and phrases; Nabokov savagely criticized the work, giving chapter and verse about the mistakes. I cannot help but sympathize with Arndt, although I must acknowledge his mistakes.

———. “Egyptian Nights,” in *Aleksandr Pushkin—Complete Prose Fiction.* Translated and with commentary by Paul Debreczeny. Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1983. Debreczeny is one of the outstanding Pushkin scholars in the United States.

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———. *Eugene Oenegin—A Novel in Verse.* Translated with commentary by Vladimir Nabokov. 4 vols. New York: Bollingen Series, Pantheon Books, 1964. A literal translation, highly accurate but clumsy and, in places, difficult to read; brilliant, provocative, with sometimes maddening commentary and criticism, by one of the 20th century’s outstanding literary personalities.

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Riasanovsky, Nicolas. *History of Russia.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. Widely regarded as one of the best and most balanced accounts of one of the world’s most exciting histories.

Scammell, Michael. *Solzhenitsyn: A Biography.* New York: Norton, 1984. A widely recognized, authoritative work on the writer.

Schaffer, Peter. *Amadeus.* Los Angeles, Calif.: The Saul Zaentz Company, 1984. A play and a film based on Pushkin's play *Mozart and Salieri*. Although it departs a great deal from the original play, the film brilliantly captures Pushkin's frolicsome yet penetrating mood and intent.

Schapiro, Leonard. *Turgenev: His Life and Times*. New York: Random House, 1978. A fascinating examination of Turgenev's life.

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———. *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich.* Translated by H. T. Willetts. With an introduction by Katherine Shonk. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2005. A new translation of the most famous work, done with the approval of the writer.

Stahlberger, Lawrence. *The Symbolic System of Majakovskij.* The Hague: Mouton and Co., 1964. Written under the influence and guidance of R. Jakobson, a scholar who knew the poet well.

Styan, J. L. *Chekhov in Performance.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978. Written by a British scholar who often crossed the line between literary criticism and theatrical performance.

Tchaikovsky, P. I. *Eugene Onegin*. Germany: Philips Classics sound recording, 1993. A chance for English speakers to get some of the rhythms of Pushkin, as adapted and changed by Tchaikovsky.

Thomas, D. M. *Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn—A Century in His Life*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998. Another approach to the issues of politics and literature that surround the writer's life.

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Trotsky, Leon. *Literature and Revolution*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960. A fascinating essay by the man who, after Lenin, did most to establish the USSR.

Turgenev, Ivan. *First Love and Other Stories.* Translated and with an introduction by Richard Freeborn. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989. A translator with a good feeling for Turgenev's fine style.

———. *Fathers and Sons (A Norton Critical Edition).* Edited and translated by Ralph Matlaw. New York: W.W. Norton, 1966. An interesting collection of various views concerning Turgenev, both in and out of Russia.

Wasiolek, Edward, ed. *Critical Essays on Tolstoy*. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1986. Commentary by a highly original American critic who knows Russia from firsthand experience.

———, *Tolstoy's Major Fiction.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978. A work by an original and challenging American critic.

Weil, Irwin. *Gorky: His Literary Development and Influence on Soviet Intellectual Life.* New York: Random House, 1966. I shall let the reader arrive at his or her own conclusions about the early work of this enthusiast of Russian literature.

Zenkovsky, Sergei A., ed. *Medieval Russia's Epics, Chronicles, and Tales*. New York: Dutton and Co., 1963. The best English-language collection of old Russian literature, organized by an excellent scholar.

Zoshchenko, Mikhail. *Nervous People and Other Stories.* Translated by Maria Gordon and Hugh McLean, with an introduction by Hugh McLean. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975. A good selection of the stories, with a very intelligent and knowledgeable account of the literary and political context.