Professor Irwin Weil is a Professor in the Department of Slavic Languages and Literature at Northwestern University. He earned his B.A. and M.A. at the University of Chicago and his Ph.D. at Harvard University. Professor Weil is the recipient of the Northwestern University College of Arts and Sciences Award for distinguished teaching and the Gold Pushkin Medal from the International Association of Teachers of Russian and Russian Literature for outstanding teaching and research.

Guidebook Contents

Part 2 of 3

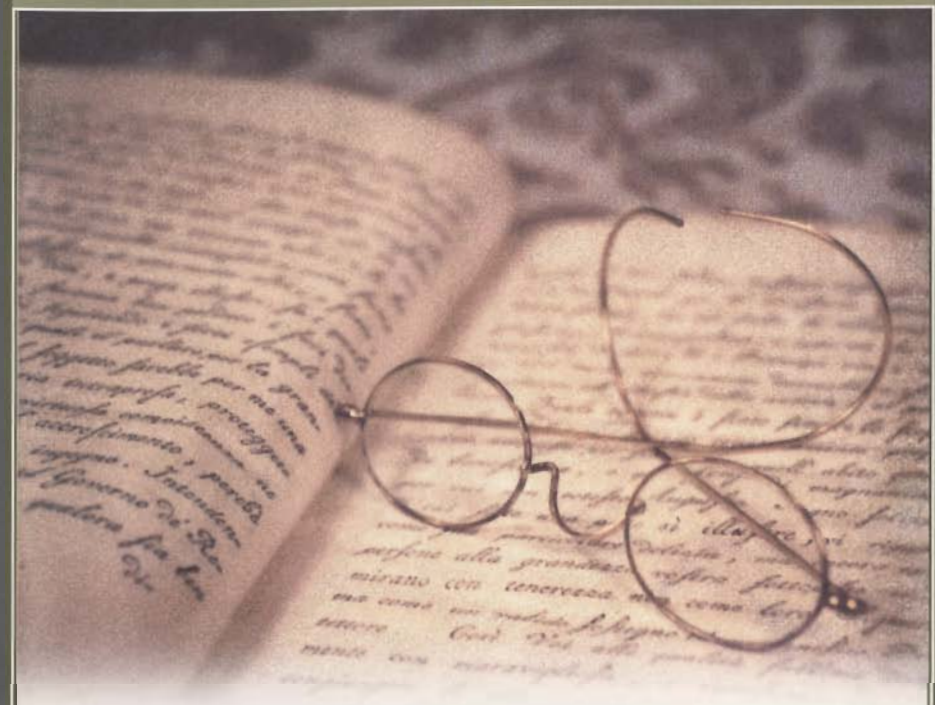
THE TEACHING COMPANY®
4151 Lafayette Center Drive, Suite 100
Chantilly, VA 20151-1232
Phone: 1-800-TEACH-12 (1-800-832-2412)
Fax: 703-378-3819
www.TEACH12.com

2830-02

Cover image: Reading Glasses.
© Jennifer Kennard/CORBIS.

THE GREAT COURSES®

Literature & English Language



Classics of Russian Literature

Taught by: Professor Irwin Weil,
Northwestern University

Part 2

Course Guidebook

THE TEACHING COMPANY®

Irwin Weil, Ph.D.

Professor of Russian and Russian Literature, Northwestern University

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 19th-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?"

Table of Contents

Classics of Russian Literature
Part II

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 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:

1. 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 *comme 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:

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

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

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

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-19th-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.

IV. 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?

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.