

LEO TOLSTOY

“The one thing that is necessary,
in life as in art,
is to tell the truth.”

BY JESSICA TEISCH

“Tolstoy is the greatest Russian writer of prose fiction.” -Vladimir Nabokov

COUNT LEO TOLSTOY (1828-1910), one of Tsarist Russia's greatest 19th-century thinkers, writers, and social reformers, made a life seeking and communicating his truths. He cast questions about romantic love, familial ties, class conflict, individual conscience, and redemption juxtaposed against 19th-century Russian history. Delving into the psychology of aristocrats, soldiers, prostitutes, and peasants, Tolstoy painted realistic portraits of all walks of Russian life. “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way,” begins his classic novel, *Anna Karenina* (1877). In this tragic love story and in his masterpiece, *War and Peace* (1869), he perfected the art of social and psychological realism, tying his strong moral philosophy to the quest for life's meaning. “No one has ever excelled Tolstoy in expressing the specific flavour, the exact quality of a feeling,” wrote critic Isaiah Berlin in 1953.

Tolstoy, who looked outside his privileged position in the landed nobility, also embraced the pressing social questions of the day. A century of turmoil, including Napoleon's invasion of Russia, the Crimean War, the assassination of Alexander

II, and battles over serfdom and land reform, influenced his critique of his government, society, and the Russian Orthodox Church. As revolutions led to constitutional reform throughout Western Europe, violent opposition to tsarist rule increased. Not surprisingly, Tolstoy dedicated his 90 volumes of novels, short stories, diaries, and essays to the notion that Russia could become a utopian society only if it rejected its tsarist autocracy and embraced the new religious spirituality he found late in life. Although he rejected Marxism, Tolstoy presaged the themes of unrest that culminated in Lenin's 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, which occurred seven years after his death.

Leo Nikolayevitch Tolstoy, the fourth of five children, was born on August 28, 1828 on an estate at Yasnaya Polyana, Tula Province, 130 miles south of Moscow. His great grandfather, a prince, had acquired the land in 1763. Peter the Great bestowed the title of “Count” on one of his ancestors. After being orphaned at age nine, Tolstoy lived with his aunts. In 1844, he began to study at Kazan University, though he left without a degree. He then spent a few profligate years in Moscow and St. Petersburg. In 1851, he and his older brother joined an artillery regiment in the Caucasus. He served with distinction in the Crimean War (1853-56), experiences he recounted in *Sevastopol*

WHERE TO START

Start with **ANNA KARENINA**, Tolstoy's most popular novel. If you can keep all 580 historical and fictional characters straight, **WAR AND PEACE** offers a sweeping epic that sets the individual against history. For a shorter story, pick up “Death of Ivan Illych,” and for an introduction to Tolstoy's spiritual conversion, try **CONFESSION**.

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Stories (1855-56). He also started the first volume of his autobiographical trilogy, *Childhood* (1852), which contrasts his wealthy upbringing with that of his peasant playmates. In 1855, he left the army and returned to St. Petersburg. Two years later he departed for France, Switzerland, and Germany to study educational reform. He believed that education could uplift society, particularly the peasant class, and published textbooks on the subject. The school he started for peasant children on his estate, however, did not succeed.

Tolstoy married Sophia Andreyevna Behrs in 1862, with whom he had 13 children. With Sophia serving as his secretary, he continued to write. He began his major work, *War and Peace*, in 1865, modeling the character of Pierre Bezuhov after his own life. A decade later he wrote *Anna Karenina*, his most popular novel.

Around 1876, Tolstoy embarked upon a painful period of self-examination. He converted to Christianity, embracing the Christian Bible and ideas about pacifism and anarchism expressed in Henry David Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" (1849). Tolstoy concluded that people should look within themselves and God, not to the state, for moral guidance. As Prince Peter Kropotkin wrote: Tolstoy "took the anarchist position as regards the state and property rights, deducing his conclusions from the general spirit

of the teachings of the Christ" (*Encyclopædia Britannica*, 1911). The tsar later censored much of Tolstoy's work, and in 1901 the Russian Church excommunicated him for these beliefs.

He outlined reasons for his Christian "anarchism" in *Confession* (1879). "I cannot recall [my young adulthood] without horror, loathing, and heart-rending pain," he wrote. "I killed people in war, challenged men to duels with the purpose of killing them, and lost at cards. . . . I was a fornicator and a cheat." Moral questions started to dominate his works, from *A Short Exposition of the Gospels* (1881) to his last great novel, *Resurrection* (1899). By this time, Tolstoy viewed himself more as a moral sage than a writer. As Tolstoy's estate became a site of pilgrimage for his growing following, he renounced his earthly (and aristocratic) existence. Only his youngest daughter, Alexandra, supported her father's ascetic calling. In 1910, he headed with her to an unknown destination. When he died on November 20, 1910, at the small railway station of Astapovo, thousands of peasants turned out to mourn his death.

Tolstoy's Legacy

The popularity of *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* often overshadows Tolstoy's profound influence as a moral and religious reformer. While rebelling against industrial

TOLSTOY: AN OVERVIEW

A HISTORY OF YESTERDAY (1851)

A short memoir.

CHILDHOOD, BOYHOOD, AND YOUTH (1852-56)

Tolstoy started the first volume of this semi-autobiographical trilogy when he served in the Russian army at age 23. It recounts the intense emotions, experiences, and memories of a rich landowner's son, Nikolenka, as he comes of age.

SEVASTOPOL STORIES (1855-56)

Tolstoy wrote these stories while defending Sevastopol in the Caucasus, the scene of a large battle during the Crimean War.

THE COSSACKS (1863)

Olenin, a young aristocrat disillusioned by Moscow high society, takes a post as a cadet in the Russian army. When he's sent to a remote Cossack outpost in Transcaucasia, he finds that his birth does not confer automatic respect—especially with Cossack women and their suitors.

* WAR AND PEACE (1865-69)

* ANNA KARENINA (1875-77)

A SHORT EXPOSITION OF THE GOSPELS (1881)

In 1876, Tolstoy converted to Christianity while rejecting its divinity, a story told in *Confession*. This exposition expounds on his new faith and philosophy.

* CONFESSION (1882)

WHAT I BELIEVE IN (1882)

Another exposition of his religious and philosophical beliefs.

WHAT THEN MUST WE DO? (1886)

In this part autobiography, part critique of capitalism, Tolstoy condemned the Russian landed aristocracy's violent exploitation of the peasantry.

THE POWER OF DARKNESS (1888)

This "Christian tragedy" about sin and redemption, considered Tolstoy's finest play, portrays the greed and horrors of a peasant community in 19th-century Russia.

* THE KREUTZER SONATA (1889)

THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS WITHIN YOU (1894)

Tolstoy's major work on Christian anarchism, which rejects evil through acts of good.

WHAT IS ART (1898)

Rejecting acknowledged masterpieces (including some of his earlier works and those of Dante, Michelangelo, and Shakespeare), Tolstoy argues that artists have a moral (religious) responsibility to create art to improve humankind.

* RESURRECTION (1899)

HADJI MURAD (1896-1904)

During Tolstoy's stint in the Russian army, an Avar chieftan, Hadji Murad, fled to the Russians. Tolstoy, who witnessed the chieftan's death at the hands of the Chechens, recounts the horrors and nobility of war.

THE LAW OF LOVE AND THE LAW OF VIOLENCE (1908)

A denunciation of law and authority, tied to Tolstoy's belief that Christianity lacked moralistic conceptions of behavior and rules of conduct.

THE LIVING CORPSE (1911)

Also known as *The Man Who Was Dead*, this drama explores an individual's desperate self-negation. When a man fakes his death so his wife can be with the man she loves, he tries to recover his soul.



1849



1856



1861



1862



1868



1874



1876

capitalism, Tolstoy's Christian anarchism represented a spiritual revolution that never transpired. He nonetheless left a great intellectual legacy in Russia and throughout the world. In the last years of his life he corresponded briefly with Mohandas Gandhi, who had read *The Kingdom of God Is Within You* (1894). Gandhi applied Tolstoy's concept of nonviolent resistance (a key part of the Russian's Christian understanding) to British rule, which helped win India's independence. During the Satyagraha (passive resistance) campaign in South Africa, Gandhi named his second "cooperative commonwealth" after Tolstoy. Gandhi's ideas, in turn, inspired widespread social movements, including Martin Luther King, Jr.'s battle for civil rights. Tolstoy left future generations with masterful portraits of Russian life and paths to religious truths. He also, in his deeply compassionate outlook toward all human life, became a conscience for modern times.

MAJOR WORKS

War and Peace (1869)

Tolstoy wrote this monumental work between 1865 and 1869. He was then in his mid-30s and overseer of a 1,800-acre estate; his wife was pregnant with the first of their 13 children. He called this period "five years of unremitting and single-minded labor." But success soon came. The *Moscow News*, upon receiving the first of the four volumes in 1867, proclaimed it a "great novel." It reflects Tolstoy's belief that fate prevails over free will, but faith in the latter makes people human. It also argues that we can only understand history by examining the challenges faced by large numbers of peasants and aristocrats alike—not Napoleon alone.

THE STORY: This epic tale of love, fate, determinism, and war features five families living during Napoleon's 1812 invasion of Russia. After he inherits a large fortune, the restless Pierre Bezukhov searches for personal meaning. Prince Andrei Bolkonsky must defend his honor and family. As both men fall in love with the aristocratic heroine, Natasha Rostov, personal dramas and momentous historical events consume each character's life. "Every action of theirs, that seems to them an act of their own free will, is in an historical sense not free at all, but in bondage to the whole course of previous history, and predestined from all eternity."

"The picture of human life is complete. The picture of the Russia of those days is complete. The picture of what we call history and the struggle of nations is complete. The picture of everything that people consider to be their happiness and greatness, their sorrow and their humiliation, is complete. That is what *War and Peace* is." MOSCOW NEWS, 12/17/1875.

"Most great novels succeed by being absolutely individual. They not only show us a way of looking at the world but make us feel—at least for a time—that this is what the world is really like." JOHN BAYLEY, "NOT A NOVEL . . . : WAR AND PEACE," IN LEO TOLSTOY'S WAR AND PEACE, ED. BY HAROLD BLOOM, 1988.

"Tolstoy's *War and Peace* ... has more to say on everything from God to love than any other book I can think of." JOHN COLE, NEW STATESMAN, 11/1/1996.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Tolstoy's masterpiece, in which people appear to be accidental instruments to history's larger design.

Anna Karenina (1877)

Tolstoy confessed, "I wrote everything into *Anna Karenina*, and nothing was left over." The rather scandalous novel told the truth about love and human nature by pitting adultery against the family life of the landed gentry. It also revealed a strong political agenda in its broad examination of issues of social justice. Like *War and Peace*, *Anna Karenina* paints a sweeping portrait of 19th-century Russian life.

THE STORY: *Anna Karenina* tells parallel stories that contrast different marriages and lifestyles. The beautiful, rebellious Anna abandons her husband and polite society to follow her heart to Count Vronsky—and a tragic end. A philosophical landowner, Konstantin Levin, happily married to Kitty Shcherbatsky, attempts to reform his serfs' lives, but questions his own existence. In this novel, there are no fixed judgements, just matters of mind and heart.

"We are not to take *Anna Karenina* as a work of art; we are to take it as a piece of life. A piece of life it is." MATTHEW ARNOLD, FORTNIGHTLY REVIEW, 12/1887.

"...I read *Anna Karenina* with a deepening sense of the author's unrivalled greatness. ... [T]he book is a sort of revelation of human nature in circumstances that have been so perpetually lied about that we have almost lost the faculty of perceiving the truth concerning an illicit love." WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS, MY LITERARY PASSIONS, 1895.

"The real tragedy of Anna, and of certain characters in [other] novels who perished like her, is that they are unfaithful to the greater unwritten morality. ... All the while, by their own souls they were right." D. H. LAWRENCE, IN D. H. LAWRENCE AND TOLSTOY: A CRITICAL DEBATE, BY HENRY GIFFORD AND RAYMOND WILLIAMS, 1959.

"Tolstoy is the greatest Russian writer of prose fiction. ... No wonder, then, that elderly Russians at their evening tea talk of Tolstoy's characters as of people who really exist, people to whom their friends may be likened, people they



1876



1885



1896

see as distinctly as if they had danced with Kitty and Anna or Natasha at that ball or dined with Oblonski at his favorite restaurant.” VLADIMIR NABOKOV, LECTURES ON RUSSIAN LITERATURE, 1981.

“As for the idea that unhappy families are somehow aesthetically superior, more dramatic, more passionate—well, isn’t that a mite too easy a Bohemian pose? I’d be the last person to dispute Tolstoy’s genius, but I suspect that all he really meant was that happy families are a fat lot of good to a man planning an 800-page novel.” ROBERT WINDER, NEW STATESMAN, 1/8/2001.

THE BOTTOM LINE: A tragic love story; Tolstoy’s “other” masterpiece.

A Confession (1884)

Despite his literary successes, Tolstoy became severely depressed. “Why should I live, why wish for anything, or do anything?” he asked. “Is there any meaning in my life that the inevitable death awaiting me does not destroy?” After failing to find relief in the Russian Orthodox Church, he turned to Christian principles of universal love and resistance to evil. He also renounced his earthly existence and left his estate to live as a peasant. *A Confession* explains this radical “conversion” and marks the turning point in his literary career. After 1880, most of his work dealt with religious life.

THE STORY: “Whenever my life came to a halt,” Tolstoy writes, “the questions would arise: Why? And what next?” Fearing that any meaning that his life accrued would “disappear like a soap bubble” after his death, he began to heed the words of Christ, reject the church’s orthodoxy and his own intellectual triumphs, and search for true spiritual faith.

“Tolstoy awakens in his reader the will to be a man; not effectively, not spectacularly, but simply, really. ... As I read his different ethical books, *What to Do*, *My Confession*, and *My Religion*, I recognized their truth with a rapture such as I have known in no other reading, and I rendered them my allegiance, heart and soul, with whatever sickness of the one and despair of the other.” WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS, MY LITERARY PASSIONS, 1895.

“*A Confession*, one of the noblest utterances of man, is the chronicle of his doubts and merciless self-examination. ... The result is a masterpiece of the highest art, comparable to the *Book of Job* in its terrible human urgency of the need to know, as well as in its wonderful language, with biblical echoes, and its compelling use of parables to illustrate ideas.” ERNEST J. SIMMONS, INTRODUCTION TO TOLSTOY’S WRITINGS, 1968.



1898



1898



1899

“What has appealed to me most in Tolstoy’s life is that he practiced what he preached and reckoned no cost too great in his pursuit of truth.” MOHANDAS (MAHATMA) GANDHI, IN MAHATMA, VOL. 2, ED. BY D.G. TENDULKAR, 1960.

THE BOTTOM LINE: A memoir of existential crisis and spiritual awakening.

The Death of Ivan Illych (1886)

Tolstoy wrote this novella after his midlife crisis, when he embraced his newfound (and personally altered) Christianity. The plot, as in *Confession*, reflects his own fear of having lived a meaningless and senseless life.

THE STORY: Ivan Illych, a judge living in the Russian provinces, is a peaceful, ordinary, and rather shallow man. When he faces death from a mysterious illness at age 45, he finally asks, “Maybe I did not live as I ought to have done. ... But how can that be, when I did everything properly?” Thus begins a spiritual conversion that leads to a brief, illuminating vision—and a death all the worse for having lived a life, as Henry David Thoreau described it in his writings, “of quiet desperation.”

“In it he not only reverts to the wonderful realism of his early fiction, but adds an emphasis new and startling in the development of Russian literature. ... But the story is also filled with those psychologically realistic and perceptive touches made familiar to us by earlier novels - ... the subtle indications of the mourners’ insincerity ... the indirect hints of the dissimulation and hypocrisy of Ivan Illych’s grieving wife and colleagues, who barely disguise their secret concern over the advantages or disadvantages that will accrue to them because of his death.” ERNEST J. SIMMONS, INTRODUCTION TO TOLSTOY’S WRITINGS, 1968.

THE BOTTOM LINE: A powerful meditation on mortality and the meaning of life. (How will your friends benefit from *your* death?)

The Kreutzer Sonata (1889)

This novella takes its title from Beethoven’s 1803 Sonata in A major, which Beethoven dedicated to the French composer Rodolphe Kreutzer. Tolstoy adopted this work as a metaphor for the annihilation of morals. Because of its controversial position on the “sexual” question and “woman” problem, the novella caused a sensation in Russia, and was banned both there and in the U.S. Anton Chekhov criticized it as “arous[ing] in the reader questions, doubts.” The tsar accused Tolstoy of preaching immorality, and forced him to write an 1890 postscript that explained his unorthodox stance—an incident that eventually led to his excommunication.

THE STORY: Do you marry for love or to fulfill an obligation to God? While traveling by train, a diverse set of



1901



1903



1905



1908



1909



1910 d.

passengers begins to discuss the institution of marriage. The Marshal of the Nobility Pozdnyshev tells the story of his youthful sexual arrogance with prostitutes and later unhappy marriage. Suspecting that his wife is having an affair with her music partner, he lets jealousy overcome him. He stabs her to death, blaming his rage on the women who feed men's base instincts.

"In creating his main character, Pozdnyshev, there is no doubt that Tolstoy drew upon various aspects of his own relations with his wife: the periods of tenderness and coolness, the discord, the quarrels. . . . His main concern was his own conscience." ALEXANDRA TOLSTOY, *TOLSTOY: A LIFE OF MY FATHER*, 1972.

THE BOTTOM LINE: A novella that reveals Tolstoy's belief in the hypocrisies of marriage and explores the role of art and music in society.

Resurrection (1899)

Slimmer and more spiritually mature than previous novels, *Resurrection* solidified Tolstoy's reputation as a religious and moral reformer. It garnered such attention that translations were simultaneously published (and editions pirated) in England, France, Germany, and the U.S. French editors decried the infrequent love scenes; American editors deleted them. Conservatives criticized Tolstoy's reproach against the church; progressives praised his realistic portrait of Russia's evils. But themes of guilt and forgiveness stayed put.

THE STORY: In his youth, Prince Dmitrii Ivanovich Nekhliudov abandoned the child he brought into the world with Ekaterina Maslova, a peasant forced into prostitution after he rejected her. Years later, when he sits on a jury that tries Ekaterina for murder, he's wracked with guilt. Following her to Siberia, where she's sentenced to hard labor, he seeks to free her from bondage and find spiritual salvation for himself.

"Resurrection naturally forces comparison with those supreme works, *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, and it must be admitted that it falls below the lofty artistic achievements of these earlier novels. . . . In fact, *Resurrection* is in many respects an amazingly accurate portrayal of the spiritual biography of Tolstoy, and though this may detract from it as an artistic performance, it provides rich and authoritative material for all who wish to understand the tremendous moral and religious struggle of one of the foremost thinkers in the latter half of the nineteenth century." ERNEST J. SIMMONS, INTRODUCTION TO *TOLSTOY'S WRITINGS*, 1968.

THE BOTTOM LINE: A psychological tale of guilt, anger, redemption, and forgiveness, set against the backdrop of Russian life. ■

SUPPLEMENTAL READING CLASSIC ANARCHIST TEXTS

Confession is considered a classic anarchist text. Some of Tolstoy's other writings might shock readers. As he wrote in "Writings on Civil Disobedience and Nonviolence" (1886):

"A Russian should rejoice if Poland, the Baltic Provinces, Finland, Armenia, should be separated, freed from Russia; so with an Englishman in regard to Ireland, India and other possessions; and each should help to do this, because the greater the state, the more wrong and cruel is its patriotism, and the greater is the sum of suffering upon which its power is founded. Therefore, if we really wish to be what we profess to be, we must not only cease our present desire for the growth of the state, but we must desire its decrease, its weakening, and help this forward with all our might."

ON THE DUTY OF CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE | HENRY DAVID THOREAU (1849): An influential protest against the government's obstruction of individual liberties. Thoreau uses the example of his refusal to pay taxes as protest against slavery and the Mexican War.

MUTUAL AID: A FACTOR OF EVOLUTION | PETER KROPOTKIN (1902): This call for anarchist communism and challenge to classical Darwinism argued for both cooperation and competition in nature.

AUTHORITY AND FREEDOM | BERTRAND RUSSELL (1949): These lectures debate the conflicts between authority and individual rights.

"LETTER FROM BIRMINGHAM JAIL" | MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. (APRIL 16, 1963): Addressed to eight white clergymen, this classic document criticized the "gradualist" approach toward achieving racial equality.

ANIMAL LIBERATION | PETER SINGER (1975): The classic moral and philosophical text on animal rights.

MANUFACTURING CONSENT | NOAM CHOMSKY AND EDWARD S. HERMAN (1988): A free market economy allows the American media to control the news.

THE TRANSPARENT SOCIETY | DAVID BRIN (1998): A call for a more open society in which the public can monitor the authorities in the same manner authorities monitor the public.

THE ESSENTIAL GANDHI | MAHATMA GANDHI, ED. BY LOUIS FISCHER (2002): An introduction to Gandhi's thoughts on politics, civil rights, spirituality, civil disobedience, and non-violence.