

RUSSIA THROUGH THE EYES OF TOLSTOY AND DOSTOEVSKY (EGL 74)

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Office Hours: Thursday, 8:50-10:00 p.m. and by appointment

Overview

This course will examine the ways in which two of Russia's greatest writers artistically responded to and participated in the political, social, economic, and existential struggles of their age--the second half of the nineteenth century. This era in Russian history witnessed significant changes in many aspects of Russian society and culture. Among these changes were the replacement of a pre-modern agrarian economy with a modern, industrialized one; the emergence of a highly diversified and exciting, yet confusing and impersonal, urban culture; the replacement of the traditional, Russian values of community and peaceful coexistence with the more progressive, Western values of individualism and competition, economic and otherwise; and the emergence of a new class of professional revolutionaries, whose self-proclaimed mission it was to correct the ills of modern life and to create the perfect society on earth.

In the course we will be primarily interested in the ways in which Tolstoy and Dostoevsky distilled the many paradoxes and problems of their age and transformed them into artistic visions which ultimately transcend time and place. Through close readings of selected texts, we will examine how each writer used the literary medium as a way to give artistic form to, and make philosophical sense out of, the chaos of contemporary experience. Are Tolstoy and Dostoevsky more alike or different as writers and thinkers about the problems of their time? What, if anything, can we take from these two novelists that might help us reflect on the struggles we face in our time and in our own lives?

By the conclusion of this course, you should:

1. Have a greater appreciation of the complexity and depth of some of the major works by Tolstoy and Dostoevsky.
2. Recognize some of the salient themes, motifs, and artistic techniques employed by Tolstoy and Dostoevsky in their fiction.
3. Have a greater appreciation of the way in which literature *as literature* is a uniquely powerful medium through which to explore both contemporary and universal human problems.
4. Have an increased sensitivity to the kinds of productive questions one asks of a great work of fiction.
5. Be able to offer your own carefully formulated, clearly presented, tentative response to the question: Are Tolstoy and Dostoevsky more alike or more different as writers and thinkers about the problems of their time?

Course Requirements:

The course will take place in a lecture/seminar format. The instructor will typically begin a class with several minutes of lecture, followed by an open-ended question designed to stimulate lively discussion and debate. Because much of the learning in this course will take place during the classroom discussions, it is imperative that students come to class well-prepared to engage in serious, rigorous discussion of the works. It is my assumption that we are all here because we want to be here, and because we believe that the ideas explored by great minds are important and deserve our serious attention. For this reason I want to offer the somewhat iconoclastic suggestion that you choose the pass/fail option for this course, as this will ensure that the motivation for coming to class and thinking about the works remains intrinsic, rather than extrinsic. There is nothing so exciting as a group of adults who choose to come together and to discuss ideas, not because such discussion serves any utilitarian purpose, but because it satisfies the human hunger for knowledge and truth.

If, for some reason, you have need for a grade in this course, then the break-down will be as follows:

class participation:	35%
written assignments:	65%

Class Participation

In addition to coming to class prepared to discuss the works, each student will have the opportunity to make a brief, in-class presentation. The student will read a brief monologue by one of the major characters from the work being discussed in a given week. The monologue should reveal some important aspect of the major character--his/her psychology, major emotional dilemma, philosophical quest, etc.. The class will then try to guess the name of the character, whose words are being quoted by the student; and the particular scene in the work in which those words are uttered. In a brief 3-5 minute presentation, the presenting student will then offer to the group his or her perspective on one or more of the following issues: How is the character artistically presented to the reader in this scene? What does this scene reveal to us about the character's larger psychology, emotional dilemma, or philosophical/spiritual quest in the novel? What do we learn about the character in this scene that reinforces, challenges, or even contradicts what we know about him/her from other aspects of the work? What is the relationship between this character and other characters in this scene or in other parts of the work? What is the significance of this character for the work as a whole? What is the significance of this scene for the work as a whole? What can we learn about the world view and artistic technique of Tolstoy or Dostoevsky by studying this particular character and this particular scene?

In order for this in-class presentation to succeed, the presenting student will need: 1--to have read the work carefully; 2--to decide which character in the work should be considered a major one; 3--to choose a scene in which that character's essential characteristics are revealed to the reader; and 4--to have thought about the larger significance of this scene in the context of the work as a whole. In other words, it is not merely a mechanical exercise, but one which will take some thought and preparation. You are encouraged (and requested) to be in touch with the instructor before you give your presentation. This will 1--give you the opportunity to bounce your ideas off of me; 2--give me the opportunity to prepare for your presentation. At the very least, let me know which character and which scene you plan to present in class.

Written assignment 1

The written assignment will be a 3-5 page essay, based on the in-class participation. The essay will be a written summary of the student's reflections on the character and the issues you have chosen for your in-class presentation. It will be a clearly-conceived, well thought-out piece (illustrated with concrete examples), which will demonstrate that you have carefully read and reflected on the work in question. Of course, you may choose to write about any character from any of the works, but it is recommended that you write about the character you have already spent some time thinking about. In either case, the paper will focus on a single scene in the work, and will address the sorts of questions indicated above, as well as any others that may interest you, and that can properly be included in a short, coherent essay.

The paper is due anytime before the end of exam week, but I strongly encourage you to write it shortly after your in-class presentation.

Final Paper

The final paper will be an essay, 12-15 pages in length, and it will be an expansion of your midterm assignment. It will be a clearly-conceived, well thought-out and argued piece, which will incorporate ideas and examples taken from a work by both Tolstoy *and* a work by Dostoevsky. In this final paper, you will be asked to answer the same sorts of questions that you were asked to address in the midterm paper. Only now you will compare and contrast two characters and two (or more) scenes, one from a work by Tolstoy and one from a work by Dostoevsky. The essay will be focused enough to treat your chosen subject with depth, yet broad enough to offer insight into one of the course's overarching questions: Are Tolstoy and Dostoevsky more alike or more different as writers and thinkers about the problems of their time? In preparation for this final assignment I encourage (but do not require) you to consult the optional readings:

George Steiner, *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky: An Essay in the Old Criticism* (at Stanford bookstore) [especially the introduction and conclusion]; and

Selections from Dmitry Merezhkovsky, *Tolstoy and Dostoevsky as Artists* (at Stanford bookstore in course reader)

Please set up an appointment with the instructor well in advance of the due date in order to discuss your ideas and approach. I also encourage you to discuss your ideas with other students in the class. The final paper is due by the end of exam week.

Syllabus

Existential Angst I: Of the City, the Country, and the Story of Human Solitude

Thursday, September 24: *Poor Folk* by Dostoevsky

Thursday, October 1: *Family Happiness* by Tolstoy

Existential Angst II: On the Cusp of Life and Death

Thursday, October 8: “Notes from the Underground” by Dostoevsky

Thursday, October 15: “The Death of Ivan Ilych” by Tolstoy

The Russian Predicament in toto I: A Dostoevskian Approach

Thursday, October 22: *Crime and Punishment* by Dostoevsky
[Parts I-II: pp. 1-165]

Thursday, October 29: *Crime and Punishment*
[Parts III-IV: pp. 166-266]

Thursday, November 5: *Crime and Punishment*
[Parts V, VI, and Epilogue: pp. 266-465]

The Russian Predicament in toto II: A Tolstoyan Approach

Thursday, November 12: *Anna Karenina* by Tolstoy
[Parts I-II: pp. 1-216]

Thursday, November 19: *Anna Karenina*
[Parts III, IV, V: pp. 216-499]

Thursday, November 26: No class: Thanksgiving

Thursday, December 3: *Anna Karenina* and Wrap-Up
[Parts VI, VII, VIII: pp. 500-740]

Optional Readings:

George Steiner’s *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky: An Essay in the Old Criticism* (at bookstore)

Selections from Dmitry Merezhkovsky’s *Tolstoy and Dostoevsky as Artists* (at bookstore in course reader)