

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## LEO TOLSTOY

(1828-1910)

### Works (major prose works)

*Childhood*, 1852  
*The Cossacks*, 1863  
*War and Peace*, 1869  
*God sees the Truth but Waits*, 1872  
*Anna Karenina*, 1877  
*What I believe*, 1884  
*What is to be done*, 1886  
*The Death of Ivan Ilyitch*, 1886  
*The Kingdom of God is within you*, 1895

### Biography

Leo Tolstoy was born on September 9, 1828 in Yasnaya Polyana. He belonged to a distinguished aristocratic family, of noble descent, and was the fourth among five children of Count Nikolai Ilyich Tolstoy and Countess Mariya Tolstaya. Both of his parents died early, and had to leave their children for others to raise.

Tolstoy himself was avid student, with access to abundant educational opportunities. His initial desire was to join the faculty of languages at Kazan University, and to this end he prepared exhaustively for the necessary entrance exams; he immersed himself in Arabic, Turkish, Latin, English, French and German. History, religion, and geography were also parts of the package. Tolstoy was admitted into Kazan University in 1844. Unfortunately, he was unable to study beyond the second year, and was obliged to return to Yasnaya Polyana. For some time, he was busy moving between Moscow and Saint Petersburg, sowing wild oats in a typical way, but on occasion exceeding the typical. (Gambling was the particular weakness of the younger Tolstoy, the son of privilege, and the inheritor of the availability of funds for self-indulgence.)

Before long, in this period of wild oats, Tolstoy realized that he was wasting his life, and he resolved to return to University, thinking, as it happens, that he would be able to find employment with the government. Instead, as it turned out, he ended up like his elder brother, doing military service in the Caucasus. Tolstoy began to take writing seriously at this point.

In 1862 Tolstoy married Sophia Behrs, a woman sixteen years younger than himself, with whom he was to have thirteen children—five of whom died at an early age. Husband and wife worked happily together for the first years of their marriage—she helping him as copy editor and financial manager, as well as in the heavy responsibilities of domestic life. The decline of their felicity set in with his decision to reject his inheritance and to live a life of increasingly austere severity.

In 1862, the year he married, Tolstoy began writing his masterpiece novel, *War and Peace*. Between 1863-69 the six volumes of the work were written. This novel turned out to be an epic study of the nature of history, as well as a close account of the fates of several upper class Russian families, during the Napoleonic Wars (1812). Figures like Napoleon and Alexander play their parts, if only to emphasize the smallness of the individual, in the grandeur of the sweep of history.

*Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy's second master novel, was begun in 1873, and completed in 1878. Like *War and Peace*, *Anna Karenina* reflects a deep knowledge of Russian society, seen both up close and fraught, and in the wide angle lens of world history. Later works, like *The Death of Ivan Ilyitch* (1886) and *What is*

*to be done?* (1901) carry Tolstoy's wide human perspectives into areas touching the heart of Christian compassion.

In his later years, Tolstoy grew constantly closer to the position of Christ, in his Sermon on the Mount, and to other principles of love and non-violent resistance. In this stage Tolstoy created works that would determine his lasting influence over thinkers like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King. Tolstoy's lasting influence can still be felt, in the classroom and in the political arena.

Tolstoy died of pneumonia, at the age of 82.

## Achievement

**History.** Tolstoy, in *War and Peace*, creates and develops a theory of history, which is original, at least in the form he gives it. Whereas great 19th century historians, like Thomas Carlyle in England, had emphasized the importance of the great man, in generating the major developments in human history, Tolstoy shifts the emphasis, for the development of history, to the great impersonal currents that move the energies of human time.

**Christianity.** In his later works Tolstoy turned increasingly toward the basic Christian principles of love and self-sacrifice, as formulated by Christ in the Sermon on the Mount. In his story of the death of Ivan Ilyich, Tolstoy is already unfolding his powerful sense of the commonality of death, as a judgment portal faced by all. To note; this turn of belief, in Tolstoy, springs from later in life conversion, and is far less visible in his great earlier novels, where the religious is rarely more than background music.

**Epic.** *War and Peace* is an innovation in literary history, a novel of epic proportions—580 characters—in which the fate of nations and the meaning of history are fearlessly embraced, largely through the experiences of a half dozen families from the Russian nobility, who lived through the French invasion of 1812. This work is epic in the wider sense of reminding us of the wide-margined imaginative achievements of such poets as Dante and Homer, who like Tolstoy boldly addressed the whole knowable world of their times.

**Adultery.** In *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy innovates boldly, by his direct study of the anatomy of adultery. Anna Karenina is evaluated directly and harshly for her infidelity, and yet the novel is no simple moral tale, taking advantage of Anna's weakness. It is a deathless exploration of the human condition, with its readiness to degenerate.

## Themes

**Degeneration.** In Anna Karenina herself, as in many characters of *War and Peace*, moral decline is an evident first stage toward death itself. The Tolstoy behind this perception, which belongs already to his earliest work, is the severely moral Tolstoy which will dominate the final stages of his own moral severity. Ivan Ilyich, in death, is the figure of the little man for whom the ethical life makes impossibly heavy demands.

**Land.** Levin, in *Anna Karenina*, is devoted to the land, and introduces, into that novel of high social immorality, the richness of agricultural interests, and a discussion field for Tolstoy himself, who is palpably pleased to be able to turn to nature for one of his themes. Anna's isolation from the homeland of nature, is poignantly emphasized by Levin's turn back to the land, and to the serfs who live off of it.

**Search.** The theme of search for the meaning of life is central to all Tolstoy's writing. Pierre and Andre, in *War and Peace*, hunt for meaning throughout the novel, open as they are—in their relative softness and sensitivity—to the unexpected promptings of fate and destiny. One might say that this whole meaning-search is determinative for the later Tolstoy himself, whose Christian writings directly confront the possibilities for new meaning that Christ introduces.

## Characters

Tolstoy strikes many as god-like in his creative stance, distant, all-seeing, yet at the same time interior to his characters and their world. His two greatest novels, *Anna Karenina* and *War and Peace* give him abundant opportunity to display his talent at establishing memorable characters, and at distributing generally dark insights into them.

A trio of markedly selfish characters interweave through *Anna Karenina*. **Anna** herself is the wife of a selfish but influential figure in the St. Petersburg court. It is no great surprise, consequently, when she falls in love with a much younger, and much better looking, man, Prince **Vronsky**. Vronsky himself is as ego centered as Anna, and though they melt in a hot passion, for a short while, they are both concerned chiefly with their own pleasure, are not interested in sacrificing, and eventually tear themselves to pieces. The pair of them are perfectly complemented by the hedonistic Prince **Oblonsky**, Anna's brother, who, though himself a veteran of a long failing marriage, cannot bring himself to share his knowledge with his sister, Anna.

*War and Peace* boasts a huge drama of characters, set against family events occurring during the war between Russia and the Napoleonic forces. Among these characters two stand out for their provocative interrelation to one another, as well as for their inherent universality. **Prince Volkonsky** is a military strategist and aristocrat, who is always on the side of hard thinking and careful planning, while his increasingly close friend, **Pierre Bezukhov**, is jovial and charitable, forever reaching out to help others. Tolstoy fixes these two friends, as he did the three selfish figures of *Anna Karenina*, at a universalizing, and as though god-created distance from himself. He seems to create for the pleasure of being The Creator.

Tolstoy's godlike proclivities, as author, do not interfere with his delight in finding the god-like among his characters, a discovery he makes—at the height of his talent—in the splendid short story, 'God sees the truth but waits.' Ivan **Aksionov** there reaches to a level of sanctity rivaling, perhaps exceeding, that of the author who created him.