

RUSSIAN LITERATURE – 19th Century

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PART I - Early 19th Century Russian Literature - Romanticism

Introduction:

Alexander I's era was a period of creativity when Russian literature produced independent, original and authentically national works. It was a period in which literature moved from neoclassicism to Romanticism and from the writing of imitative works to ones which would be the basis of a national cultural model.

Golden Age of Literature. Known as the Golden Age of Russian literature, the first forty years of the 19th century the literature of this period was the outcome of two developments in the 18th century. One was the creation of a literary language that acted as a bridge between the daily speech of educated Russians and the official Church Slavonic. The other was the solution in the mid-18th century of technical issues of poetic form. One noticeable trend of the Golden Age was the abandonment of literary genres serving the state and patron, such as the ode.

Romanticism. A new literary movement, Romanticism, emerged in the early 19th century. A reaction to Neoclassicism, which had dominated art and literature in the mid-18th century, Romanticism spread throughout Europe in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

Romanticism is not seen in Russia until the early years of the 19th century, and only became a major movement in Russian literature from 1810 to 1840. Russia soon adopted the main Romantic prose genres: the society-tale, novel-in-letters, travel notes, memoirs and historical romance. Although Russian romanticism was initially seen in poetry, it shifted to prose in the course of its development.

Poetry. A.S. Pushkin was one of the first proponents of this new literary style, which was both realistic and nationally conscious. The poetic works of M. Y. Lermontov's were able, briefly, to maintain this level of stylistic excellence.

Peose. Poetry remained the dominant literary form until Lermontov's death in 1841. However, the displacement of poetry by prose began at the end of the 1820s, and by 1830 prose was clearly becoming the dominant form.

Gogol. Although unsuccessful as a poet, N. V. Gogol did become a successful prose writer. Regarded as the pioneer of realistic prose, Gogol's stories contained elements of romantic and the grotesque.

Romantic literature often extolled the extraordinary man who somehow rose above society, seeing such a person representing the individual spirit.

Professional Writers. Writers in the romantic era came to see their normal position in society as one in opposition to the existing order, but also came to see writing as a profession. Previously writers had not expected to earn their livelihood from writing, but in the 19th century literature became more commercialized. In the 18th century writers were either

landowning aristocrats, or had some form of government support. However, writers increasingly relied on the reading public to earn their living as the 19th century progressed.

Repression. In 1848 the view that Europe was degenerating was driven home to the Russian government, as revolutions convulsed most of continental Europe, with the notable exception of Russia. Tsar Nicholas I responded to this revolutionary turmoil by harshly suppressing all forms of free expression in Russia. The period from 1848 until Nicholas I's death in 1855 came to be known as the gloomy seven years, and constituted a bleak period in Russian literature and culture. In 1849 F. M. Dostoevsky, M. Saltykov-Shchedrin, I. S. Turgenev and A. N. Ostrovsky, all members of the Petrashevsky circle, were arrested and put on trial.

Readings

Pushkin, Eugene Onegin

<http://archive.org/details/eugeneoneguineon23997gut>

The Captain's Daughter or the Daughter of a Commandant

<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/13511>

<http://www.online-literature.com/alexander-pushkin/daughter-of-the-commandant/>

Lermontov, *A Hero of Our Time*

<http://www.eldritchpress.org/myl/hero.htm>

<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/913>

Gogol, *Dead Souls* <http://www2.hn.psu.edu/faculty/jmanis/gogol/deadsouls.pdf>

The Cambridge History of Russian Literature, Edited by Charles A. Moser, 1992, Ch.4.

Emerson, C., *The Cambridge Introduction to Russian Literature*, Cambridge University Press, 2008, Ch.5.

The Routledge Companion to Russian Literature, Edited by Neil Cornwell, 2001, Ch. 7.

The Routledge Companion to Russian Literature, Edited by Neil Cornwell, 2001, Ch. 8.

Wachtel, A.B. & Vinitsky, I., *Russian Literature*, Polity Press, 2009, Ch. 3.

Lunacharsky, A., *Pushkin as Critic*,

<http://www.marxists.org/archive/lunachar/works/puskin.htm>

The Cambridge Companion to Classic Russian Novels, Edited by Malcolm V. Jones and Robin Feuer Miller, Cambridge University Press, 1998, Ch. 8.

The Cambridge Companion to Classic Russian Novels, Edited by Malcolm V. Jones and Robin Feuer Miller, Cambridge University Press, 1998, Ch. 9.

Fencher, N., *Pushkin's Politics*

<http://it.stlawu.edu/~rkreuzer/pfancher/Pushkin%20Final%20webpage.doc>

Driver, S., *Pushkin: Literature and Social Ideas*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1989.

Debreczeny, P., *The Other Pushkin: A Study of Alexander Pushkin's Prose Fiction*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1983.

Questions

Discuss the Age of Revolutions and discuss how the Russians were affected.

As you read the reading assignments for this class, consider in what respect the beliefs of the Romantics are reflected in their works.

Read Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* and talk about Pushkin's concepts of poets and style of writing.

Read Pushkin's "The Captain's Daughter" and discuss how cultural diversity is reflected in the novel.

Read Pushkin's "Ode to Liberty" and discuss why Pushkin was exiled from St. Petersburg by Alexander I. Talk about his political views.

Read Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time* and discuss the concept of the superfluous man in 19th century Russian literature. Can you say that Pechorin fits the description of the superfluous man? How?

Read Gogol's *Overcoat* and *Dead Souls* and discuss how Gogol portrays his time.

PART II - Late 19th Century Russian Literature – Realism

Introduction:

Realism. Russian realism flourished between 1855 – 1880, a period which coincided with the reign of Alexander II, a period of reforms which came to be known as the Age of Realism.

The emergence of Russian realistic literary works in latter half of 19th century took place in the context of the political unrest which had begun during the reign of Nicolai I in the 1840s. Writers, under the influence of the literary critic V. G. Belinsky, came to view themselves as social critics and took a realistic approach to social problems in Russia such as serfdom. In the 1860s the critics N. G. Chernyshevsky and N. A. Dobrolyubov carried on Belinsky's activity. However, these reformers were among the Westerners, those who held that Russia should develop in the manner Western European civilization. Opposing them were the Slavophiles, a group committed to old Russian traditions – Orthodoxy and imperial autocracy.

Novelists. Of the numerous novelists from this period the three most important figures are I. S. Turgenev, F. M. Dostoyevsky and L. N. Tolstoy. Another lesser, but still important figure is I. A. Goncharov, the author of *Oblomov*.

Through the first half and into the mid-19th century Russia was increasingly tense as it underwent dramatic political, economical, and social changes. Vast inequalities in wealth and the formation of new social classes which transformed the old aristocratic power system into a plutocratic one were two results of industrialization. Urban growth was accompanied by the decimation of traditional agrarian lifestyle. In addition, an unexpected result of Russian participation in the effort to defeat Napoleon was the introduction of into Russia of western ideas on constitutions, representative government. In 1825, following the death of Tsar Alexander I, a regiment of soldiers refused to swear allegiance to the Tsar, calling instead for the establishment of a Russian constitution. Although these soldiers, who came to be known as the 'Decembrists', were finally suppressed, the possibility of great social change was in the air throughout the century.

Nihilism. Taken together, these events prepared the way for the appearance Nihilism. Russian monarchs in this period found themselves facing a terrible dilemma. They realized that serfdom and the existing social structure could not be sustainable and would likely result in a violent rebellion. There was a pressing need to carry out reforms that were effective and politically realistic. However, by the mid-19th century resolving these problems was almost impossible due to a combination of state repression combined with the length of time that these problems had been allowed to fester. For many Russians, Nihilism presented the only reasonable answer to their situation. In addition, Russia was in the position of having to carry out reform following its defeat in the Crimean war, a factor which the Nihilism movement even more urgent. Finally, although Russia had in many ways become a brutal and violent police-state, still it was unable to effectively hinder the Nihilists and other dedicated revolutionaries, with the result that the Nihilism movement began to spread in Russia.

A number of realist novels show the influence of the Nihilism movement, among them *Notes from the Underground*, *Crime and Punishment*, and *The Devils* by Dostoevsky; *Fathers and Sons* by Ivan Turgenev; *War and Peace* by Tolstoy; and *What is to be done?* by Chernyshevsky. In particular, Bazarov's depiction of the tension between generations in *Fathers and Sons* as the rejection of both the romantic and idealistic movements made him an icon of the Nihilist movement; the Nihilism movement even took its name from this novel. The publication of Chernyshevsky's *What is to be Done?* practically became the guidebook of the movement. It provided a portrayal of Nihilism's socialist values, showed how to live and

keep one's radical values intact, and even showed how Nihilist non-monogamy worked. As a result, the Russian novel took on new religious and philosophical significance by incorporating both the Nihilists' sense of cultural crisis and the desire for new, absolute societal values. In addition, in the same way that many Russian literary works from this period were influenced by Russia's social condition, these works, in turn, had a great impact on Russian society and culture. For example, it has been claimed that Tsar Alexander's emancipation of serfs was, at least partially, a reaction to the depiction of peasant life found in Ivan Turgenev's collection of *Sportsman's Sketches*.

Dostoevsky. In the 1860s Dostoevsky's became convinced that Western civilization had an unhealthy, narrow focus on the ego or self, and that this pathological condition threatened Russia. He viewed this Western egoism as a direct result of the Westernization of Russia, and believed that it constituted a grave danger to his country. This opinion was only confirmed by a tour of Europe that Dostoevsky made in 1862.

Chernyshevsky. In contrast to Dostoevsky, Chernyshevsky's novel *What Is to Be Done?*, published in 1863, heartily approved of egoism, and viewed it as not only a model of desirable individual behavior, but absolutely necessary for harmonious social relations. In the novel, Chernyshevsky's principal characters view themselves as complete egoists, and claim that their behavior is guided solely by informed calculations of their own interests. However, while doing so they benefit others and generally behave quite virtuously, demonstrating the benign effects of "enlightened" or "rational" egoism. For Dostoevsky this was an extreme, gross distortion of the reality he saw in Russia. Chernyshevsky's fictional character were just that – fictional, and not the real-life egoists Dostoevsky feared. As Dostoevsky saw it, the doctrine put forth in Rational Egoism was dangerous; by glorifying the self over others it had the potential to divert the minds of impressionable young people from true values and turn them toward a true, immoral, and destructive egoism.

Utilitarianism. Nonetheless, despite Dostoevsky's reservations, Chernyshevsky and the movement that crystalized around his work *What Is to Be Done?*, would also come to play a major role in popularizing utilitarian ideas among the intelligentsia in Russia.

Utilitarianism can lead an ordinary man into thinking that he is extraordinary, not bound by the same constraints as ordinary men, and it can justify murder and the subjugation of others through simple mathematics. This is precisely the situation that the main character in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* finds himself in since he has adopted a utilitarian morality, acting under the presumption of personal grandeur and utilitarian responsibility. In the *Brothers Karamazov*, rather than satirize Chernyshevsky's utilitarianism Dostoevsky presents a tragedy depicting the suffering that awaits the Russian people should they adopt an alternative to the morality and worldview of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Crime and punishment. The main character in *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov, behaves according to utilitarian precepts. In his mind, the commission of what he regards as a simple crime he will be of great benefit to humanity as a whole. He is utterly convinced that he can be extraordinary, but if only he can act upon a mathematical equation of human happiness. Using an equation provided by a student and an officer, Raskolnikov will justify homicide. What Dostoevsky attempts to demonstrate in this novel is that this utilitarian morality can lead to the belief that one is extraordinary; as a result, life-and-death decisions can be made solely on the basis of their estimated mathematical impact on the population as a whole. However, these "extraordinary" men and women are nothing more than criminals, unable to cope with the consequences of their espoused morality. In the end, *Crime and Punishment's* Raskolnikov is far from being an extraordinary individual; rather he appears to be a self-deluded utilitarian who believed he was extraordinary.

Readings

Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/t/turgenev/ivan/index.html>
<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/30723>

Dostoyevsky's *Notes from the Underground*
<http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/DosNote.html>

<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/600>

Crime and Punishment <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/2554>

Tolstoy's "Resurrection" or "The Awakening" <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/17352>

Goncharov's "Oblomov" <http://www.eldritchpress.org/iag/oblomov.htm>

<http://archive.org/details/oblomovivan00goncuoft>

Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?*

<http://archive.org/details/whatstobedonerom00cher>

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Venturi, F., *Roots of Revolution, A History of the Populist and Socialist Movements in 19th Century Russia*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960, p. 316.

Cizevski, D., *History of 19th Century Russian Literature, The Age of Realism*, Vol.2, 1974, Ch. 1, 2, 3, 4, 6.

Bortnes, J., "The Poetry of Prose", *Readings in Russian Literature*, Bergen, 2007. Ch. 9.

Hamren, K., *The Eternal Stranger: The Superfluous Man in Nineteenth-Century Russian Literature*, Thesis, 2011.

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Questions

Discuss the Russian intelligentsia (Westerners and Slavophiles) in the early 19th century.

Read Dostoyevsky's novel *The Notes from Underground* and compare the underground man with the unhappy 19th century intelligentsia. What are the differences between them?

Explain how Dostoyevsky treated the Russian intelligentsia in his works, and why Dostoyevsky was against Westerners. Discuss why Dostoyevsky was critical of utopian socialists.

What are his major objections to living in a perfect world? Why does he criticize the Crystal Palace?

Discuss rational egoism and utilitarianism.

Discuss what makes the main character, the underground man Nihilist.

Dostoyevsky's was said to be a devout Christian. Can you find any evidence for his religious beliefs in this novel?

Read Tolstoy's *The Brothers Karamazov* and talk about the religious motifs in the novel.

Read Goncharov's *Oblomov* and compare the novel's main character Oblomov with the main character the underground man from the novel *Notes from Underground*. Are they stereotypical characters in nineteenth-century Russian literature. Why?