

RUSSIAN LITERATURE - Fiction

Overview

Until the 14th century, Russian fictions were translated works from Serbian, Polish and Czech writers. The original Russian secular prose fiction was composed towards the end of the 17th century under the influence of the European works. By the end of the 18th century, native prose fiction began to appear modelled from a picaresque novel of Europe. It was not until third and fourth decade of the 19th century Russian literature saw excellent examples of original historical, satirical, political and psychological prose fiction, and realistic writers of this period began to examine the larger, current issues of society, trade, etiquette, the individual, and the empire. Moving into the first decade of the next century, Russian prose fiction became more diverse and experimental. The majority of authors examined the theme of the social lives of the new man, or women, under the socialist system. New genres, *Urban Prose* and *Village Prose*, depicting the lives of the Soviet middle class and the peasant commune, appeared in the 1960s. A common characteristic of almost all 20th century authors were their handling of new topics and, compared to earlier writers, their more courageous approaches to social, moral, and ideological issues. However, much of their sharpest criticisms would have to wait until the period of glasnost before it would be published.

1. POST CLASSICAL PERIOD

From the 14th to the 16th centuries there were translated fiction works that reached Russia through Serbia, like the *Alexandriad*, a Hellenistic romance attributed falsely to the historian Callisthenes. This work not only presented an inaccurate account of Alexander the Great's life and deeds, but was viewed with a great deal of suspicion by the church.

Another work that came to Russia from Serbia was the *History of Troy*, which covers not only the siege of Troy, but also other stories like the story of the Argonauts.

In the 15th century the first examples of literature of entertainment were produced. *The Tale of Dracula* written by Fyodor Kuritsyn depicts a person who was supposed to visit the lands where the action takes place. However, the facts in this work were all distorted.

This century also produced *The Tale of Three Kings: Arcadius, King Nemesyan the Proud, and King Borzomysl Dmitrievich* which was a version of a well-known anecdote. The story, however, depicts an appalling ignorance of Catholicism.

The late 15th century had more modern pieces of fiction such as *The Tale of Luke of Koloch* which describes a poor peasant who travels all over the country with a miraculous icon that brings cures.

2. EARLY MODERN PERIOD

There were a number of secular fictional stories such as the *Tale of Queen Dinara*, a fictionalized biography of Queen Tamara of Georgia and the queen of Dinara composed in the 16th century. Another secular fiction work was the *Homily on Hops by Cyril, a Slavonic Philosopher*.

The 17th century marks the beginning of prose fiction that was translated from Polish. There were other works translated from South Slavic and also Czech. Manuscripts of these works of fiction were collections of stories that had been translated from Western sources, and were circulated among the Russian elite. Tales such as *Melissa*, and *Stephanites and Inchnelates* were among the best-known examples circulated

in manuscripts. Another example was a collection of moral stories called *Speculum magnum exemplorum* translated from Polish. Also worthy of mention is a work called the *Gesta romanorum* translated from Polish in 1681, a collection of religious allegoric fiction used for Sunday sermons.

Original Russian secular prose fictional works began to be composed towards the end of the 17th century. One outstanding work was the *Tale of Savva Grudtsyn* that ran 15 printed pages, and written in Russo-Slavonic. It included several fantastic stories set in real life, such as the satirical story of the *Tale of Frol Skobejev* that implicitly depicted the moral decline of Russian society in the new Petrine period. It was a cautionary tale about the moral laxity that inevitably accompanies the abandonment of Christian virtues.

Prose fiction in manuscripts from the 18th century was under some influence from Western literature as well as traditional religion and oral literature. However, the trend in 18th century Russian fiction was to return to the older, traditional forms of storytelling in place of Western narrative styles. Among the most popular examples was the anonymous *Story of the Russian Sailor Vasily Koriotsky and the Beautiful Princess Irakliya of the Land of Florence*. This work combined elements of chivalric romances, adventure stories, didactic allegories and folktales.

The first Russian fiction work intended for a small, elite and secular readership was *The Journey to the Isle of Love*, written by Trediakovsky. The purpose of this work was perhaps to create a new etiquette and new forms of romantic expression for post-Petrine Russian society. A related innovation was the emergence erotic fiction that depicted romantic liaisons among the upper class a game.

By the end of the 18th century, native prose fiction began to appear with Mikhail Chulkov's *The Comely Cook* whose plot and setting were modelled on a European picaresque novel, and it was a remarkable example of the Russian rogue novel. His *The Mocker, or Slavonic Tales* was another fictional work which draws the attention of the modern reader with its protagonist who happily gravitates between the conflicting moral standards of moralistic literature and the value system of the subculture.

Another picaresque novel, *Adventures of Ivan, a Merchant's Son*, a romantic brigandage by Ivan Novikov, was an import from Western literature and introduced more specifics of Russian life, graphically depicted the uncertainty of social mobility and the vagaries of fortune.

Fyodor Emin's prose fiction *Fickle Fortune, or the Adventures of Miramond* was a vehicle to convey his political and moral ideas. His *The Letter of Ernest and Doravra* was the first attempt at a Russian epistolary novel with sentimentalist traits, and was a clear imitation of Rousseau's *La nouvelle Héloïse*.

Another prose fiction writer of this period - Mikhail Kheraskov published his *Numa, or Flourishing Rome* depicting a utopian dream of an enlightened monarchy, a mythical king of Rome, which was an imitation of the enlightenment ideas portrayed in Catherine II's own manifesto.

Influenced by Richardson, Goethe and Sterne, Aleksandr Radishchev wrote his *Journey from Petersburg to Moscow*. In it he used the situations and people that he encountered on his journey to launch a scathing critique of numerous issues in Russian society, from the excess and luxury of court life in the capital to prostitution and the institution of serfdom. As a result, the *Journey*, which is stylistically closer to European fiction works than to Russian fiction, was published anonymously.

In the last third of the 18th century, inspired from European sentimentalism, Russian prose fiction was having difficulties making progress against substantial foreign translations of the Western writers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Samuel Richardson, Jonathan Swift and Laurence Sterne.

In the last decade of the century, it was Nikolay Karamzin with his first novella *Eugene and Julya* published in Russia's first magazine for children, challenged his European contemporaries. Also, with his first Russian sentimental story, *Poor Liza* and his historical novella *Martha the Governor*, Karamzin started a new stage in Russian literature. Karamzin's later works, *The Sensitive Alan and the Cold Man*, and *A Knight of Our Times*, exhibit keen psychological observation combined with a deep sentimental analysis.

3. NINETEENTH CENTURY

Golden Age:

It was not until the third and fourth decade of the 19th century Russian literature saw excellent examples of prose fiction from the writers Narezhny, Bestuzhev, Pushkin, Lermontov and Gogol.

Vasily Narezhny wrote *A Russian Gil Blas, or Adventures of Count Chistyakov* which was modelled on Alain-René Lesage's picaresque novel *Gil Blas*. Although the Minister of Education banned the publication of this novel because of its satirical content, Narezhny continued to write prose fiction and published his *A Black Year or Mountaineer Dukes*, a story about the installation of a colonial bureaucracy in the Caucasus.

Another writer of prose fiction of this period, Aleksandr Bestuzhev, was in exile in the Caucasus for his participation in the Decembrist uprising, and there he was able to publish his Caucasus tales such as *The Red Veil*, *Ammalat-bek*, and *Mulla-Nur* and his society tales *A Test* and *The Clock and the Mirror*.

Alexander Pushkin's historical fictions *The Captain's Daughter* and *A History of the Pugachev Rebellion* were both dedicated to the events of Pugachev's Rebellion. His burlesque anthology of early 19th century fiction, *The Tales of Belkin* is a complex work that satirizes contemporary trends in Russian fiction through the narrators of each of the work's five tales. The influence of the Western European Romantic fiction can be seen in his famous narration *The Queen of Spades* which was a moral story about guilt and punishment. Pushkin's novels had a deep impact on the development of Russian prose fiction, and influenced writers such as Lermontov, Gogol, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy.

Mikhail Lermontov wrote a work of historical fiction, *A Hero of Our Time* set in the Russian Caucasus which portrays an individual who reflects this generation. Like Pushkin, Lermontov's style of economical prose fiction and simplicity of language was utilized by subsequent prose fiction writers.

Realistic writers of fiction began to examine major social issues such as society, etiquette, the individual, trade and the empire in their writings. One of the Realistic writers, Gogol, with his comic grotesque *The Nose*, depicted the absurd nature of daily life in everyday settings. Another of his works, *Revizor*, sometimes regarded as a social satire targeting systematic despotism and corruption in the bureaucracy, was actually a moral satire of corrupt officials. Gogol's *Dead Souls* and *The Overcoat* were considered the foundation of 19th century Russian realism. *The Dead Souls* is a satire that exposes the corrupt image of Russian society. Gogol in his work *Overcoat* depicted the extreme limits of the dehumanization of the individual.

In *Rudin*, a work of political fiction, Ivan Turgenev created a character endowed with great potential and a deep intellect, but who finds no way to use either of them. In *Fathers and Sons*, Turgenev created a controversial contrast of the nihilistic, materialistic youth of the 1860s with their idealistic fathers of the 1840s. Later he described the oppression of the Russian peasants and the unjust system that kept them in their places in *The Hunting Sketches*, a work based on what he had witnessed on his mother's estate at Spasskoye while hunting there.

Goncharov, in his psychological and ideological novel *Oblomov*, portrays a lazy, inactive, young aristocrat who is unable to make any decision. This condition, found in Russian social and spiritual life in the second half of the 19th century, came to be called *Oblomovism*.

Aleksandr Griboedov wrote his novel *Woe from Wit* under strict tsarist censorship. The work depicted the high society of post-Napoleonic Moscow. It is an old fashion classicist comedy, a burlesque on Moscow whose full text was only allowed to be printed forty years later.

Sergey Aksakov's essayistic prose fiction *Family Chronicle* is a fictional work based on life in his family and early experiences that on one hand criticized some aspects of the old order, such as serfdom, and on the other praised the virtues of the old, patriarchal Russian society.

Alexander Herzen, who was regarded as a leading man of letters due to his fiction, wrote his masterpiece *From the Other Shore*, a work that consists of a series of critical essays and dialogues in response to the Revolution of 1848 in France.

Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin assumed the perspective of a bemused outside observer in his satirical depiction of rural life, *Provincial Sketches*. However, in *The History of a City* provides an unvarnished portrayal of urban life's pointless cruelty, bitter struggles for power, irrational and unattainable projects, and social disorder.

Silver Age:

Fyodor Dostoevsky's philosophical anthropological fiction *The Notes from Underground* earned praise with its distinctive Dostoevskian polyphonic style. His psychological, anthropological and ideological novel *Crime and Punishment* takes the genre of the realistic social novel and adds to it anti-nihilist philosophy. Dostoevsky's other masterpieces of prose fiction were composed in a number of different styles. Two were written as parodies of popular fiction genres; *Poor Folk* satirizes the sentimental epistolary novel, while *The Double* is a parody of romantic novels. *The Brothers Karamazov* has a decidedly metaphysical approach to its subject matter, but *The Possessed* is a tragedy.

Leo Tolstoy's most controversial and philosophical novel *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* reflects Tolstoy's theories about moral living. *The Kreutzer Sonata* was another controversial work because it talks about problems never before discussed in public. Heroic fiction *Haji Murat* and his historical fiction *War and Peace* where he blends successfully the historical and the fictional into a single monolithic whole, mark the beginning of the realistic school of fiction.

Aleksandr Ostrovksy's comedies *The Insolvent Debtor*, *The Bankrupt* (or with its new title *It's a Family Affair-We'll Settle It Ourselves*), *A Poor Bride*, *A Lucrative Position and Lumber* are all descriptions of the life that the author knew from personal experience. In his comedies merchants are shown in a negative light, as dictatorial fathers, oppressive bosses, uncultured and dishonest.

Vladimir Korolenko in his *A Paradox*, *The Blind Musician*, *Yashka* and *A Strange One* takes a critical view of Russian society, peopling his novel with criminals, social outcasts, convicts, underdogs and political exiles.

Late in the 19th century Anton Chekhov emerged as a master of short fiction. He was an objective writer in that his stories always portray aesthetic values, never moral ones, and provide a rich reflection of real life in Russian society at all levels, either in the city or the countryside. For example, in his *Peasants*, he deals with rural poverty and the hopeless picture of the Russian people in rural areas. In his *In the Ravine* he introduces the real life of the lower middle class in a small town and describes human suffering similar to that in the countryside.

The founder of Socialist Realism, Maksim Gorky's first fictional stories began to appear in a two-volume collection in the late 19th century. His realistic stories earned him high praise because of his interest in milieu. His characters were on the margins of society: homeless bums, petty criminals etc. He reflected his own experiences of the hardships of the working class in his *Chelkash*, which was about the life of a professional thief; in his *Twenty-six and One* he presented the hardships of twenty-six overworked bakers, and with his first novel *Foma Gordeev*, he introduced a young man who breaks with social contacts and rebels against societal norms.

Early in the 20th century, Maxim Gorky published his stories in a collection titled *Through Russia*. He also continued to write novels. One of his novels, *Mother*, described a wide range of revolutionary factory workers lives based on his own experiences among the working class for decades.

4. TWENTIETH CENTURY

In the decade following the revolution prose fiction displayed two prominent characteristics – tremendous diversity in its subject matter and stylistic experimentation.

In this period, the realist writer Ivan Bunin was interested in his country life during the revolution of 1905 and portrayed his disappointment over the destruction of the idealistic picture of his traditional village life in his short fiction *The Village*.

Criminal Fiction: Short story writer Leonid Andreev took the material for his stories mostly from common criminal cases and from his experiences as a court reporter as in his *In the Fog*, *The Life of Vasily Fiveisky* and *The Tale of the Seven Who Were Hanged*. He also used biblical themes, imbuing them with modern symbolism and psychological insights, as in *Eleazar and Judas Iscariot*.

The writer Aleksey Remizov's prose fiction stories were marked by details of everyday life, such as violence, illness, death and suicide. In his satirical novel *The Indefatigable Cymbal* Remizov portrayed sectarians from the countryside as superstitious and odd. Another work of this period was his Gothic horror story *The Sacrifice*.

Symbolist Fiction: The symbolist writer of historical prose fiction, Dmitry Merezhkovsky, became famous with his trilogy, *Christ and Antichrist*, *Julian the Apostate* and *Antichrist: Peter and Alexis*.

Another Russian symbolist writer Fyodor Sologub published sixteen volumes of short stories titled *The Sting of Death* and *A Book of Enchantments*. He also wrote several novels: *Heavy Dreams* and *The Petty Demon*.

Andrey Bely is considered the most important innovator of 20th century Russian prose fiction. His symbolist novel *Petersburg* is widely regarded as his finest work, and is characterized by the stylistic device of colors being evoked by sounds. The events of the novel take place in St. Petersburg before the Russian Revolution of 1905. His Moscow trilogy *A Moscow Eccentric*, *Moscow under Siege* and *Masks* are considered as other masterpieces of his narrative style.

Anti-Utopian Fiction: One such writer was Evgeny Zamyatin who created a new genre, the anti-utopian novel (dystopia). He published his short novels as satires of provincial life in *A Provincial Tale* and military life in *At the World's End*. It was *We* which earned high-praise when it appeared abroad in the 1920s, first in English and then in Czech; it was published in Russia only in 1988. Zamyatin's dystopic novel *We* depicts a unified totalitarian state which has produced a society of almost complete conformity and harmony.

Mikhail Sholokhov wrote his realist novel *The Quiet Don* to show the living conditions and struggles of the Don Cossacks to survive during World War I, the Bolshevik Revolution, and the Civil War. His second novel, *Virgin Soil Uplifted*, depicts life during the collectivization period and the liquidation of the kulaks in a Don Cossack village.

Science Fiction: One of the early science fiction writers, Aleksey Tolstoy gained popularity with the novels *Aelita* and *The Hyperboloid of Engineer Garin*. He also wrote *Nikita's Childhood*, *The Sisters* and a historical novel *Peter the First. A Tour of Hell* was Tolstoy's effort to depict the hell that the tumultuous upheavals of the revolution had been for Russian intellectuals.

Realist Fiction: During the NEP period, Yury Olesha in his fictional novel *Envy*, depicted a new man created as a result of the NEP and placed him in contrast with the older society. Olesha also wrote several short stories such as *Liompa*, *The Cherry Stone*, and *Natasha*.

Andrey Platonov earned his reputation as a writer with his collection of stories *The Sluices of Epiphany*. Most of his works were published in the West because of his criticism of Stalinist policies such as the liquidation of Kulaks as a class, the Five-Year Plan and Collectivization. Among these works were his novels *Chevengur* which describes a fictional city undergoing a rapid transition to communism, and *The*

Foundation Pit which presents the building of socialism in one country under Stalin from the perspective of the common citizen.

Odessa's Jewish gangsters and the Red Cavalry Cossacks were favorite subjects of Isaac Babel's short fiction. Set in the Polish-Soviet War, the stories in *Red Cavalry* are taken from entries in a diary that Babel kept.

Twelve Chairs, a collection of short works satirizing the NEP in the Russian countryside, made Ilya Ilf and Evgeny Petrov popular figures.

In the 30s, some writers, such as Mikhail Bulgakov and Boris Pasternak continued to write in the classical tradition. Bulgakov was unable to publish his novel *The Master and Margarita* under Stalin in the Soviet Union. The work first appeared, heavily censored, after his during the Khrushchev Thaw. Describing the devil's visit to the Soviet Union, *The Master and Margarita* defies simple classification with its mix of Christian thought, the supernatural and satire. Bulgakov also published the satirical science fiction novel *Heart of a Dog*, an allegory of the Bolshevik Revolution.

Boris Pasternak's novel *Doktor Zhivago* portrayed the Bolshevik Revolution as a political coup rather than a mass uprising, and because of the negative reaction of Soviet officials, the novel had to be published in the West, and did not appear in publication till the Thaw.

Some writers, opposed Soviet ideology, chose to deal with rural settings in their works. Among them were Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Sergey Antonov, Vladimir Soloukhin, Aleksandr Yashin, all of whom attempted to portray the misery and backwardness of the Russian countryside.

Prison-Camp Fiction: It was during the Thaw, with the personal approval of Khrushchev, that Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, master of prison-camp genre, published his short prose fiction *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* which was about the Gulag camps. The novel was only published in the 60s, and long remained the sole example of a work published in the Soviet Union and critical of Stalin's legacy. Nevertheless, Solzhenitsyn was expelled from the Union of Soviet Writers in 1969 and five years later from the country.

The Khrushchev years, regarded as a period of literary stagnation, took their toll on Vladimir Tendryakov and Yury Trifonov, both of whom would clearly have been more productive in a more liberal atmosphere. However, despite the restrictions on literary expression, both found their own means to cope with the circumstances they found themselves in and to make significant contributions to Russian literature.

Urban Fiction: In the 60s and the early 70s, Trifonov started a new genre *Urban Prose*. His keen eye for detail, both physical and psychological, awareness of the rhythms of city and suburban life, and understanding of the inner turmoil of urban dwellers all made Trifonov the best-known writer of the Soviet middle class. He published his historical novel *The House on the Embankment* that portrayed the period of Stalin, his purges, the late Stalinist era, and the stagnation interpreting fundamental strains of development over the decades. In 1973, he published his historical novel, *The Impatient Ones*, depicting the assassination of Alexander II by the revolutionary anarchist group called *People's Will* which was active in the 1870s and 1880s. His *Another Life* dealt with the relationships and conflicts between the generations during the Soviet period.

Village Fiction: In the decades from the 1950s through the 1970s numerous works treating the life of the peasantry in Russia and Siberia were written in a movement known as Village Prose. Despite official censorship that often prevented authors from telling the full truth of the difficulties and injustices that confronted Russian farmers – the loss of autonomy that came with having to work on state farms or agricultural collectives, the unrealistic demands made on the rural sector by central planners as well as its exploitation and neglect by distant urban powers – village prose writers were able to depict this sector of Soviet society with more realism than almost any other. Because these writers themselves were frequently from rural backgrounds, they were able to examine all aspects of rural Russian society in great detail, celebrating its positive aspects and unflinchingly delving into its darker areas.

One example of such writers was Valentin Rasputin from Siberia, whose fame as a writer was based on a number of short stories and four novels. Rasputin used Siberia as the setting for all of his works, and his first novel, *Money for Maria*, concerns how a village responds when one family is confronted with an emergency. *Live and Remember* is a tragedy about a soldier who deserts the front lines, while *Farewell to Matyora* is a protest against the disruption of traditional rural lifestyles and environmental degradation all in the name of progress.

In the early 1960s, Vladimir Tendryakov earned his reputation with his prose fiction of rural and urban settings and characters with various occupations and stations in life. Tendryakov displayed a deep suspicion of Marxist-Leninist utopianism and the mindset that was the bedrock of standard Soviet optimism in his novel *Attack on Mirages*.

Historical Fiction: Tendryakov also began writing stories based on his two-year experience as a field-telephone specialist in several battles in World War II. *A Day that Ousted a Life* gives a detailed depiction of battlefield atmosphere and the psychological transformation it brings about.

An historical novelist Yury Davydov in his novels focused on the revolutionary movement the *Populism* (Narodnichestvo) of the 19th century. His novel *March* was about the revolutionary Populist (Narodnik) organization *People's Will* that advocated violence. His work *The Slack Period of Autumn* was another work in which he portrayed *People's Will*. In *The Fate of Usol'tsev* Davydov depicts an unsuccessful expedition by peasants and intellectuals to found a socialist colony in Ethiopia.

The Soviet writer Sergey Zalygin, who wrote his prose fiction *The South American Variant* late in the 20th century, portrayed the psychological problems of a woman in her middle years during the Soviet system. In his novel *On the Irtysh*, Zalygin portrayed the forced collectivization in Siberia under Stalin, and the sufferings of Siberian peasants. He was also the editor of an anthology called *The New Soviet Fiction: Sixteen Short Stories*.

Moral questions, whether the result of complex ethical choices that faced an individual or those that resulted from scientific and industrial activities, were the subject matter of Daniil Granin's works in the 1960s and early 1970s. He wrote his fiction about World War II together with Ales Adamovich *Leningrad Under Siege* (The Book of Blockade) which gave detailed accounts of the 900-day siege of Leningrad. Granin's other book *The Bison: A Novel About the Scientists Who Defied Stalin* was a fictional portrait of genetician Nikolay Timofeyev-Resovsky.

In the 1960s the political liberal Elena Ventsel' (also known as I. Grekova) rose to prominence as an author. Her writing was distinctive for its ironic sense of humor, sharp understanding of people's strengths and weaknesses, strong sense of justice, and mix of compassion and understanding for people's sufferings and frustrations. *The Faculty*, a novel that centers around the lives of the researchers, teachers and students from the same academic department of a research institute, was one of Grekova's most popular works. Despite being unable to publish some of her writing before 1985, her critical, skeptical views on life in the Soviet Union remained unchanged, as shown in her critical story *Without Smiles*, written in 1970 but published in 1986.

For Georgy Semyonov, human interactions, thoughts, emotions, and behavior in both the natural and human worlds constitute the subject matter for his writing, as evidenced in *The Smell of Burnt Powder*. Semyonov's stories were frequently melancholy, depicting the loss and sense of inadequacy felt by many. However, his short story *The Collection* takes a darker turn, conveying a sense of horror.

Andrey Bitov published several volumes of short fiction in the Soviet Union under the title *Life in Windy Weather*. His work *Pushkin House* examines the mental and emotional life of an intelligent young to middle-aged man with an education. It was banned in the Soviet Union. The complete text was first published in the United States and it was allowed in the Soviet Union in 1989. His fiction *The Symmetry Teacher* is called by him as an "novel-echo" of an untraceable English novel written by a writer called A. Tired-Boffin. It was never quite finished, and a compiled version was released in 2008, and republished in 2014.

Discussion/Questions

1. How would we characterize 20th century fictional work?
2. What are the specific characteristics of 18th century Russian fiction?
3. Compare the fiction writers from Stalin's period with the writers from Khrushchev's period. What conclusions can you draw from such a comparison?

Reading

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