

ENG 650 – The 19th Century Russian Short Story in Translation

Cell: (XX) XXX-XXXX

Office hours are to be determined but I'm generally available Weds or Thurs afternoon.

My office is 107 Tolley Hall.

The Russian short story has had an indelible effect on the form, especially in America. In this class we will study stories from the great 19th Century Russian masters. Our emphasis will be on “craft” – the ways in which these writers attained their effects, approached via close readings of selected stories. We will also concern ourselves with the issues associated with translation itself: What are we reading when we read a work in translation? Do translation issues affect some writers more than others, and why? The goal of the course is a heightened awareness of the role that language, form, structure, and narrative logic play in the creation of a work of literature. The only goal is to find something that inspires you and helps you more deeply inhabit the lineage and thereby helps you become the writer you want to become.

This class is really about the short story form itself, and we are just using these twenty-odd examples to get at that topic in a detailed and specific way. It's not required that you like every story or agree that it's a masterpiece, but it is important that you be able to articulate your response to it... We are not really here to judge or rank them, but to understand their power, and especially to look at how and where and why that power appears, when it does. And in some of the lesser-realized stories, we will look at *that* – why is this a lesser story?

What we are doing, really, is putting these stories (all of which have, to greater or lesser extent, withstood the test of time) into our artistic minds, and letting them germinate there. It's not necessary that we “know” what is good about them or come out of the class with some sort of list of “takeaways.” My theory is that just by engaging deeply with them, they will expand our artistic sensibility. It might be many years before the seeds they plant produce... flowers, or fruit, or, you know, some power in your work. But this is all part of the essential work of joining an artistic lineage. So: work hard on these stories, in your own flavor, and they will make you a bigger writer.

Work. Each week, you'll read the assigned story or stories, as listed below. I'll send them out via email, in pdf form. I'd ask that you NOT read them in advance – just wait for the week they're assigned. That way, your reaction will be more recent and immediate etc.

The idea is to engage deeply with the story/stories. To help you with this, you'll be required to keep a notebook of responses. The format for these is flexible – it can be a line-by-line annotation, notes, essay, graphs, a running list of questions (with attempts at answers, as possible): whatever helps you really think through the piece and moves you toward a deeper understanding. These should be substantial – not just jotted down or pro forma. I want to see evidence that, after having read the story for a first-impression or pleasure, you've gone back in, in some sort of (your form of) “technical” manner. I'd like you to keep these responses in some sort of coherent physical form – a folder or binder or whatever. I'll collect these periodically to ensure you're on the right track. To get credit for the class, you'll have to complete an entry for every class date listed below. If you miss class, I'll still expect you to read the story and do the response. But don't miss class unless it's unavoidable...

Past experience indicates that this notebook approach has a flaw – people (some people!) tend to delay/defer the entry. So in past semesters I've collected after week four and found people who hadn't done any. PLEASE don't be one of these people. It's disrespectful and works against your goal in being

here. Err on the side of overdoing it. With stories this great, you will be amply rewarded for overworking on them, trust me.

Attendance. We have a total of 13 classes. (We won't have class on Sept 29, as indicated below). Because we'll be covering so much, I can allow one unexcused absence only. If you need to miss more than that, let me know.

Classroom Participation. Our in-class discussions are the most important part of the class. Your prep should include developing at least two questions or observations for classroom presentation. And your goal should be to speak at least once a class. I know this is easier for some than for others, but, if it's not easy for you, giving it a shot is maybe even more important. If you have issues that make it particularly difficult for you to contribute in this way, let me know. Even an expression of confusion or indifference or dislike for a story is valid and can be used to take the discussion up a notch.

Other. I'd appreciate if we consider the class off-limits to social media. What we are doing is high-risk and it doesn't work as well if we, in the slightest, perceive it as a performance, or for public consumption. We are hoping to make a sort of artistic intimacy in here. It works best that way.

If there are any issues – re the topics covered, or tone, or class dynamics, or anything, the best response is to bring it up in class, as it happens. If this isn't comfortable, the next-best approach is to see me privately. If this doesn't work for you, see (XXXXXX).

Mostly, I'm excited to be able to work through these amazing stories with you.

(This list is subject to change and adjustment...)

Sept 1	Introduction.
Sept 8	Pushkin: The Queen of Spades + The Undertaker
Sept 15	Turgenev: The Singers
Sept 22	Gogol I: The Two Ivans + Nevsky Prospect
Sept 29	Cancelled
Oct 6	Gogol II: The Nose + The Overcoat
Oct 13	Dostoyevsky: The Christmas Tree and the Wedding + The Honest Thief + Bobok
Oct 20	Tolstoy I: The Devil + Master and Man
Oct 27	Tolstoy II: Ivan Illych + Alyosha
Nov 3	Chekhov I: The Darling + In the Cart
Nov 10	Chekhov II: Lady with Pet Dog
Nov 17	Chekhov III: About Love trilogy
Nov 24	Thanksgiving Break: No Class
Dec 1	Babel I: The Story of my Dovecoat + In the Basement
Dec 8	Babel II: Guy de Maupassant + My First Goose
	(Last class)

RUSSIAN FORMS – FIRST CLASS

Attendance sheet, with email addresses

THE CLASS.

Not a survey – looking at seven writers and 24 stories – many great writers neglected.

These writers taught me narrative, so I assume they can help you too – can help me teach you.

Usually one or two stories a class – allows a close look.

The main questions: WHERE did this move me, and HOW?

FORMS COURSE ETHOS

Why do we read these stories?

Lineage and the hopper idea. Art = mysterious.

How should we talk about these? Technically. TRYING TO STEAL/LEARN.

Main notion is: NO ONE knows how stories work.

WHY THE RUSSIANS?

Crazy historical period, not unlike our current one.

Mad economic disparity – a permanently dispossessed class (serfs) – a ruling aristocratic elite, within which the literary world was centered – an urgent progressive movement – a stubborn ruling class.

All of this resulted in one of the most fertile periods in literature.

Literature was what people did – imagine if movies + the internet + pop music was all rolled into one. All of the upper class read. And wrote. VERY sophisticated, humanist people...

These writers believed, almost without thinking about it, that the purpose of literature was to help us understand how to live better, more “moral” lives – to struggle with injustice and the BIG QUESTIONS.

The writers we’ll be studying:

Pushkin (1799 – 1837)

Turgenev (1818 – 1883)

Gogol (1809 – 1852)

Dostoevsky (1821 – 1881)

Tolstoy (1828 – 1910)

Chekhov (1860 – 1904)

Babel (1894 – 1940)

A bit of a cheat to call it 19th C, but...it's basically pre-revolutionary, with Babel spanning the revolution.

The idea that this incredibly rich period lead to one of the bloodiest and most horrible revolutions (and centuries) in history is...odd. Literature burst the boil, but made real horror: work camps (which taught Hitler), starvation, cannibalism, the Stalinist purges, etc.

BUT MOSTLY IT'S ABOUT STORY DYNAMICS...

How does a story work?

How does a story compel us through it?

These are actually quite simple stories – built on simple actions, and with a moral-ethical heart.

They present a unique opportunity to see how the machine called “story” works.

Most are masterpieces. Some are dated and/or clunky but that's OK.

They are in every Western writer's DNA because of their intense influence on the modernists in particular – the first wave of translations of Tolstoy and Chekhov especially.

So even if we never read the Russians, they are influencing us.

So...better we should read them.

MECHANICS

Syllabus – hand out and discuss

LIFESPANS OF FAMOUS WRITERS (Russians in BOLD)

Jane Austen, 41	(1775-1817)
Mary Shelley, 53	(1797-1851)
Honore de Balzac, 51	(1799-1850)
Aleksandr Pushkin	(1799 – 1837)
Alexandre Dumas, 68	(1802-1870)
Nathaniel Hawthorne, 59	(1804-1864)
Ivan Turgenev	(1818 – 1883)
Edgar Allen Poe	(1809 – 1849)
Nikolai Gogol	(1809 – 1852)
Abraham Lincoln	(1809 – 1865)
Charles Dickens, 58	(1812-1870)
Anthony Trollope, 67	(1815-1882)
Charlotte Bronte, 38	(1816-1855)
George Eliot, 61	(1819-1880)
Walt Whitman	(1819-1892)
Herman Melville, 72	(1819-1891)
Fyodor Dostoevsky	(1821 – 1881)
Leo Tolstoy	(1828 – 1910)
Emily Dickinson	(1830–1866)
Mark Twain, 74	(1835-1910)
Anton Chekhov	(1860 – 1904)
Marcel Proust, 51	(1871-1922)
Willa Cather, 73	(1873-1947)
James Joyce, 58	(1882-1941)
Nora Neale Hurston, 69	(1891-1960)
Isaac Babel	(1894 – 1940)
Ernest Hemingway	(1899 – 1961)
Eudora Welty, 92	(1909-2001)