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Mukhitdinova Umida Oybek kizi

THE WORKS OF LEO TOLSTOY

INTRODUCTION

Tolstoy's journey from dissolute aristocrat to socially agitating writer was shaped heavily by a few experiences in his youth; namely, his military service and his travels in Europe. In 1851, after running up significant debts from gambling, he went with his brother to join the army. During the Crimean War, from 1853 to 1856, Tolstoy was an artillery officer and served in Sevastopol during the famous 11-month siege of the city between 1854 and 1855.

Although he was commended for his bravery and promoted to lieutenant, Tolstoy did not like his military service. The gruesome violence and heavy death toll in the war horrified him, and he left the army as soon as possible after the war ended. Along with some of his compatriots, he embarked on tours of Europe: one in 1857, and one from 1860 to 1861.

Between 1852 and 1856, Tolstoy focused on a trio of autobiographical novels: Childhood, Boyhood, and Youth. Later in his career, Tolstoy criticized these novels as being overly sentimental and unsophisticated, but they're quite insightful about his own early life. The novels are not direct autobiographies, but instead tell the story of a rich man's son who grows up and slowly realizes that there is an insurmountable gap between him and the peasants who live on the land owned by his father. He also wrote a trio of semi-autobiographical short stories, Sevastopol Sketches, which depicted his time as an army officer during the Crimean War.

For the most part, Tolstoy wrote in the realist style, attempting to accurately (and with detail) convey the lives of the Russians he knew and observed. His 1863 novella, The Cossacks, provided a close look at the Cossack people in a story about a Russian aristocrat who falls in love with a Cossack girl. Tolstoy's magnum opus was 1869's War and Peace, a massive and sprawling narrative encompassing nearly 600 characters (including several historical figures and several characters strongly based on real people Tolstoy knew). The epic story deals with Tolstoy's theories about history, spanning many years and moving through wars, family complications, romantic intrigues, and court life, and ultimately intended as an exploration of the eventual causes of the 1825 Decembrist revolt. Interestingly, Tolstoy did not consider War and Peace to be his first "real" novel; he considered it a prose epic, not a true novel.

Tolstoy believed his first true novel to be Anna Karenina, published in 1877. The novel follows two major plotlines which intersect: an unhappily married aristocratic woman's doomed affair with a cavalry officer, and a wealthy landowner who has a philosophical awakening and wants to improve the peasantry's way of life. It covers personal themes of morality and betrayal, as well as larger social questions of the changing social order, contrasts between city and rural life, and class divisions. Stylistically, it lies at the juncture of realism and modernism.

After Anna Karenina, Tolstoy began further developing the seeds of moral and religious ideas in his earlier works into the center of his later work. He actually criticized his own earlier works, including War and Peace and Anna Karenina, as not being properly realistic. Instead, he began developing a radical, anarcho-pacifist, Christian worldview that explicitly rejected both violence and the rule of the state.

Between 1871 and 1874, Tolstoy tried his hand at poetry, branching out from his usual prose writings. He wrote poems about his military service, compiling them with some fairy tales in his Russian Book for Reading, a four-volume publication of shorter works that was intended for an audience of schoolchildren. Ultimately, he disliked and dismissed poetry.

Two more books during this period, the novel The Death of Ivan Ilyich (1886) and the non-fiction text What Is to Be Done? (1886), continued developing Tolstoy's radical and religious views, with harsh critiques of the state of Russian society. His Confession (1880)

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and What I Believe (1884) declared his Christian beliefs, his support of pacifism and complete non-violence, and his choice of voluntary poverty and asceticism.

In his later years, Tolstoy wrote almost solely about his moral, political, and religious beliefs. He developed a firm belief that the best way to live was to strive for personal perfection by following the commandment to love God and love one's neighbor, rather than following the rules set by any church or government on earth. His thoughts eventually garnered a following, the Tolstoyans, who were a Christian anarchist group devoted to living out and spreading Tolstoy's teachings.

By 1901, Tolstoy's radical views led to his excommunication from the Russian Orthodox Church, but he was unperturbed. In 1899, he had written Resurrection, his final novel, which critiqued the human-run church and state and attempted to expose their hypocrisy. His criticism extended to many of the foundations of society at the time, including private property and marriage. He hoped to continue spreading his teachings throughout Russia.

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