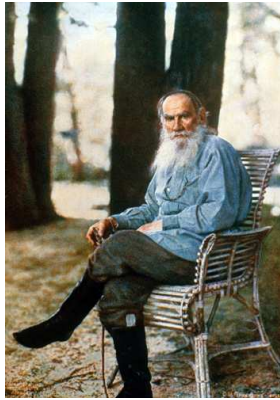


bio. CLASSROOM

BIO: Leo Tolstoy Classroom Guide



Introduction

The great British statesman and author Winston Churchill once described Russia as “a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.” This too is an apt description for the great Russian novelist and moral thinker Leo Tolstoy. Born into an aristocratic family in the early part of the 19th century, in his youth he seemed to have all the opportunity and ambition to become a leader in government or the military. But Tolstoy was constantly restless and full of self doubt. He agonized over the disparity between his social position and the retched conditions of the Russian peasants and wondered why something couldn’t be done to make their lives better.

Eventually, Tolstoy channeled this angst into his writing, producing masterpieces such as *War and Peace*, *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, and *Anna Karenina*. Later in life, Tolstoy became an advocate for pacifism and nonviolent resistance, influencing later generations of thinkers such as Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. Despite his significant contributions to the worlds of fiction and philosophy, Tolstoy continued to struggle with his own psyche, and never found the happiness in life he so desperately needed. This one-hour documentary traces his story from his childhood in Russia through his development into one of the world’s most renowned writers and intellectuals.

Objectives and Curriculum Links

Leo Tolstoy is appropriate for mature high school students. Due to some sensitive content, teachers are encouraged to view it in its entirety before airing it in class.

Vocabulary

Using the dictionary at www.merriamwebster.com, an internet resource such as www.history.com, or an encyclopedia, students should define or explain the significance of the following terms:

- Asceticism
- Bon vivant
- Cannon fodder
- Carnage
- Debauchery
- Epic
- Hearth and home
- Impervious
- Reciprocal
- Reclusive
- Romanticize
- Serfs
- Sordid
- Subservient

Discussion Questions

1. In 1854, Russia was entangled in the bloody Crimean War fighting against the British and French for influence over the declining Ottoman Empire. Why did Tolstoy's join the Russian army during this era, and how did his view of the military change after his wartime experience?
2. In 1855, Tolstoy published *Sebastopol Sketches* (named after a Russian port where Tolstoy was stationed during the Crimean War). These essays described his wartime experiences and were an instant success with Russian readers. What did Tolstoy write about in this work and why do you think it had such an impact to so many different readers?
3. When Tolstoy returned from the war, he felt compelled to write a story that would help readers understand the complexities of modern life. What subject did he chose to write about? How did his decision to write a very long novel enable him to comment on Russian society, humanity, and the world as he saw it?
4. In 1865, Tolstoy first published his novel *War and Peace* in installments. What was the initial reaction to this piece of work as presented this way? Why do you think this was the case? How did the critics and the public receive the novel once it was published as a complete book?
5. When he was five years old, his older brother, Nicholas, introduced him to a game that would end human misery. What was this game, and how did its goal prove to be a driving force in Tolstoy's life for many years after?
6. What was Tolstoy's experience like as a university student? What issues did he wrestle with in his diary entries? How did these experiences help lay the foundation for his later novels and writings?
7. In 1873, Leo Tolstoy wrote *Anna Karenina* and like *War and Peace*, the novel dealt with the lives of Russia's aristocrats and was published in serial form. The book found a new audience in 2004 when Oprah Winfrey put the book on her book club list. Why do you think this novel had such a following both in the 1870s and in the present? How does the dilemma of honoring your duty or honoring your passion ring true today?
8. Why did Tolstoy believe marriage would bring him salvation from the decadent life of his youth? How did his marriage to Sophia Bers initially prove to be a good choice for his personal and professional ambitions? What was the result of this relationship, and why do you think it turned out the way it did?

9. By the time Tolstoy had finished *Anna Karenina* in 1877, he had become disillusioned with his novel writing and sought to find a better meaning in life. What did he write about in his later years? Do you think his fervor in this writing was hypocritical or had he truly acquired an enlightened outlook on life?
10. Why do you think Tolstoy was not arrested and jailed for his criticism of the government? Why did his excommunication from the Russian Orthodox Church actually please him?
11. Today, as during his life, Leo Tolstoy is revered as one of the greatest authors of all time. How did technological advances make him an international celebrity? Why do you think he was so popular among so many people? Why do you think he remained dissatisfied with his life until the day he died?

Extended Activities

1. Leo Tolstoy's writings were very popular during his life. They served as escape and social commentary during an era of extensive political and social upheaval. But how would you sell a Tolstoy book today? Work with three or four classmates and research the aspects of Tolstoy novels and writings that have relevancy today. Create a sales promotion package to help sell one of Tolstoy's works to a major bookstore. Develop a design for the cover of the book, an illustrated poster for in-store window promotion and print media, a promotional statement that briefly describes the work and its appeal to its potential audience, and a web related advertisement that presents the work on the Internet.
2. *Anna Karenina* and *War and Peace* both cast a critical eye against the Russian aristocracy and its self absorption at the expense of the rest of the population. Online or at the library, research the social and political climate of 19th century Russia and the economic and social problems that affected the society. Then read several book and literary reviews of Tolstoy's writings, particularly his two greatest novels, and comment on how his writings reflected the tumultuous world he lived in an essay of 2-3 pages.
3. Tolstoy's novels are remembered today as some of the most important works in literary history. Based on your own readings of one of his novels, or selections from one of his novels, write a review of one of Tolstoy's books. You should include a short description of the publication that might print this review and its intended audience.
4. Leo Tolstoy's success as a writer was unique for many reasons, one of which was he was proclaimed a genius *during* his lifetime. Yet, he suffered from self-doubt and tortured guilt over his own imperfections. Imagine you are someone who has known him since you were young children. You both are now elderly and you are worried about your friend as he still seems to be restless and depressed. Write Tolstoy a letter reflecting on his life's accomplishments and try to help him change his perspective to feel better about himself and the world around him.

Websites

Biography.com Leo Tolstoy

<http://www.biography.com/articles/Count-Leo-Nikolayevich-Tolstoy-9508518>

The Literature Network, Leo Tolstoy

<http://www.online-literature.com/tolstoy/>

Classic Authors.net, Leo Tolstoy

<http://www.underthesun.cc/Classics/Tolstoy/>

Models of Success: The Great Russian Mind - Leo Tolstoy

<http://www.veoh.com/browse/videos/category/educational/watch/v7077161yt2yMA8S#>

Books

Gustafson, Richard. Leo Tolstoy: Resident and Stranger (Princeton University Press, 2006).

Orwin, Donna Tussing. The Cambridge Companion to Tolstoy. (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

Tolstoy, Leo. Anna Karenina. (Penguin Classics, 2004).

Tolstoy, Leo. War and Peace. (Knopf, 2004).