

## **Russian Novels of the Second Half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century**

### **“Make us ask the right questions!”**

The second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is an amazing period; five of the novels that would be placed at the top of any list of world literary classics were written at that time. Five renowned, widely read novels that will continue to be read for generations to come: “The Brothers Karamazov”, “Crime and Punishment”, “Anna Karenina”, “War and Peace” and “Fathers and Sons”. These great works of art were all written between 1860 and 1880, their authors seemingly competing with one another.

At the time they were written, the reading public did not read these novels in book form. They would read them as serials published in literary magazines they subscribed to. Imagine you were the editor of one of those magazines having to choose between these works of art and deciding which of them to serialise.

You would have to make a choice between “Crime and Punishment” and “War and Peace”. What actually happened was that both novels were serialised at the same time, in the same publication, one after the other. And quite naturally the authors of these great novels, Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, took great interest in reading each other’s serialised works. At times the authors would even use their characters as mouthpieces to communicate with each other. For instance, in a dialogue between Raskolnikov and the Prosecutor Porfiry, in “Crime and Punishment”, an opinion put forward by Porfiry could be commented on in the next issue by Pierre in “War and Peace”. Of course, the reader only becomes aware of such details through academic research or with the guidance of a tutor. In the Russia of that period literature had reached its artistic pinnacle and the reading public showed intense interest and excitement in these serialised novels. They were also highly respected. In turn the authors, just like the writers of modern-day TV series, made sure that every episode concluded with a build-up of tension that ensured the reader would be curious enough to want to buy the next issue.

However, the most important question to consider here is how a society with a literacy rate of only 5% was able to produce these beautiful and timeless works of art. Slavery in the form of serfdom was abolished in Russia in 1861. Up until then there was a system in place whereby serfs were bought and sold together with the land they worked on, and where the value of the land actually increased according to the number of serfs tied to the land in question. These slaves were quite deliberately left in ignorance so they would not question this economic system or revolt against their owners. Gogol, in his novel “Dead Souls”, has his hero Chichikov

travelling from region to region buying up slaves who had died but whose names still appeared in the records, and doing this for financial gain! So, in an environment like this, in a country where the target market was so small, how did these classics manage to see the light of day?

I got the chance to ask Professor Susan McReynold's the same question and her reply was:

"Demir said, don' look at the size of the literate group with a percentage. The short answer is that the number of literate Russians--the size of the Russian reading public--was not important because Dostoevsky and Tolstoy were European artists. They were fluent in multiple languages, read deeply and extensively in German, French, and English literature and philosophy, and were staying abreast of cultural and political developments in Europe. We need to think of them of as "European artists who were active in Russia." As members of the highest Russian classes, they had more in common with the educated elites in Europe than with the mass of Russian common people. So they were inspired by and writing for Russia and Europe at the same time. Tolstoy was reading the novels of Anthony Trollope before and during the composition of Anna Karenina, for example. But it is also important to stress that the importance of the Russian reading public cannot be measured quantitatively, in terms of its size. It may have been a small number of people, but they had enormous significance, both for Russia and the world. The creative productivity of this small group--the amazing art, literature, and ideas they generated--was astounding not just for Russian history but for world history. The intellectual and creative ferment, the extraordinary public debates carried on in journals and novels--I have to admit that I am envious of the people who lived through this."

We should first of all make it clear that an intellectual class of a completely different nature had emerged during that period in Russia. This class was in caught up in a desire to Westernise. It was a social class able to think like Westerners and fluent in European languages; who lived and dressed as Westerners, who followed developments in the West with a close interest. Furthermore, the writers of that period were very well educated, we converse in European languages and read contemporary European literature. It could be said that these writers were more attuned to Western culture than their native culture and were not part even of the literate five percent of Russians. The novels they wrote also targeted a Western audience. (The novels in question were to be translated into European languages at the beginning of the next century). These writers took a keen interest in the

problems they saw in Russia and used their novels to explore solutions. They debated the dilemma of what could be done to solve the problems of a Russia that was lagging behind the West and about which methods should be used to effect change. Turgenev, who had a Western background, often travelled and stayed abroad. Tolstoy as a very well-off landowner was able to lead a comfortable life. Of the writers of that time, it was Dostoyevsky who was closest to the Russian people. He had financial problems throughout his life. While his contemporaries tended to look down on the rest of society, Dostoyevsky – because of what he had experienced in his private life (dealing with fame and notoriety at a young age, being sentenced to the death penalty, being pardoned then carrying out his prison sentence in exile, the death of his child)- was able to look at Russian society from within. And so, having experienced the polarisation of Russian society from both sides, he was in a good position to understand and critique this society.

If we were to take a look at the historical context, 1825 was the year of the Decembrist Uprising. This uprising brought a period of heavy censorship where all kinds of freedom of expression was made illegal. These oppressive measures forced the country's intellectuals to find new channels of expression. All the philosophers, teachers and intellectuals of the time found an outlet in the world of literature and novels. Novels were also subject to government censorship, but writers found ways to express their views through their fictional characters and found refuge in the power of art.

We see a similar situation during the period of autocracy in the Ottoman Empire. The novel "Forbidden Love", written at that time by Halit Ziya Usakligil, is set from start to finish in a mansion. The main characters only leave the mansion twice (to go on a picnic and to visit the local market). Halit Ziya reflected the oppressive atmosphere of the time by imprisoning his characters in the suffocating setting of their mansion.

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Another important feature of these classics is the sheer length of the novels. As Irwin Weil, a now retired professor of Russian Language and Literature at Northwestern University, very succinctly put it, "The reader has to warm to the novel. The Russian novel only starts at page 1000". Indeed, lovers of these novels have also said jokingly, "Reading Dostoyevsky on the beach is strictly forbidden!", implying that the reader really has to concentrate and in order to find the real meaning hidden between the lines.

However, there is an important feature of some of these classic Russian works of literature that cannot be overlooked. Actually, these great works give the reader clues right from the opening sentences and some of them are able to

summarise the whole novel in one paragraph. As these sections are placed towards the beginning of the novels, we are often unable to comprehend them fully. We pass them by and just continue reading. Whereas the writer has already given us his message.

In just the second page of *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoyevsky shares the following paragraph with us:

“(…) I knew a young lady, still of the ‘romantic’ generation before the last, who after some years of enigmatic love for a gentleman, whom she might quite easily have married at any moment, invented insuperable obstacles to their union, and ended by throwing herself one stormy night into a rather deep and rapid river from a high bank, almost a precipice, and so perished, entirely to satisfy her own caprice, and to be like Shakespeare’s Ophelia, and indeed, if this precipice, a chosen and favorite spot of hers, had been less picturesque, if there had been a prosaic flat bank in its place, most likely the suicide would never have taken place. This is a true fact.”

This paragraph has absolutely nothing to do with the novel itself. If this paragraph were to be deleted, not only would there be no change in the storyline of the novel it would have no impact on the main theme of the novel. Here Dostoyevsky is underlining right from the beginning his view that the individual in society is neither logical nor consistent.

In the same way, let’s take a look at the opening paragraph of “*Crime and Punishment*”:

“At the beginning of July, during an extremely hot spell, towards evening, a young man left the closet he rented from tenants in S...y Lane, walked out to the street, and slowly, as if indecisive, headed for th K...n Bridge.”

In one single paragraph we are given the time, the state of the weather, the place, the subject, the location, and state of mind. In his article on the novel, the Russian critic Vadim Kozhnikov referred to this paragraph as the “core of the novel”.

And at the beginning of Tolstoy’s great novel “*Anna Karenina*”, we find Anna on a train journey from Moscow to St Petersburg. The reason for this journey is that her brother has cheated on his wife and Anna thinks she can help to manage the crisis in their household. However, Anna is travelling in the same compartment as the mother of Vronsky with whom she is later to fall in love. When the train arrives

at Petersburg, she introduced to Vronsky who has come to meet his mother off the train.

Vronsky tells Anna they had briefly met before and asks her whether she remembers him or not. Anna's reply is:

“Oh no, but I would have known you your mother and I have been talking, I think, of nothing but you all the way.”

Anna, at her mature age, directed this sentence at the young son of the countess who was not of the same generation. The hypocrisy of the sentence contained the essence of the tragedy that was to later to occur in the relationship between Anna and Vronsky.

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One of the most important features of works of classic literature which continue to be read from generation to generation, a feature that sets them apart from simple best sellers is their ability to enable the reader to feel empathy. Technically speaking, novels, examples of good literature, are the only place you can practice empathy. In these novels characters of the opposite sex, different races, diverse nationalities and varying political views work themselves into our brains. We see them through their own eyes, without marginalising them, and learn what they are feeling. We experience what it is like to be someone other than ourselves.

In his novels Dostoyevsky puts particular emphasis on childhood memories. He believes that these fond memories will protect children from the evils they will come across later in life. Professor Gary Saul Morson, who has been my tutor at Northwestern University for the last two years, underlines this aspect of Dostoyevsky's works and at the end of his lecture advises his students to, when they become parents, consciously create beautiful childhood memories for their children.

At the end of the “Anna Karenina”, Anna is fully decided on committing suicide. Referring to her lover Vronsky, she says, “I shall punish him and escape from everyone and from myself.”

The novel's final paragraph is among the most famous in world literature. Anna is now on a level with the railway tracks.

“She wanted to fall halfway between the wheels of the front car, which was drawing level with her. But the red bag which she began to take from her arm delayed her, and she was too late; the car had passed. She had to wait for the next. A feeling such as she had known when about to take the first plunge

in bathing came upon her, and she crossed herself. That familiar gesture brought back into her soul a whole series of memories of her childhood and girlhood, and suddenly the darkness that had covered everything for her was torn apart, and life rose up before her for an instant with all its bright past joys. But she did not take her eyes from the wheels of the second car. And exactly at the moment when the midpoint between the wheels drew level with her, she threw away the red bag, and drawing her head back into her shoulders, fell on her hands under the car, and, with alight movement, as though she would rise immediately, dropped, dropped on her knees. And at the instant she was terror-stricken at what she was doing. 'Where am I? What for?' She tried to get up, to throw herself back; but something huge and merciless struck her on the head and dragged her down on her back. 'Lord, forgive me for everything!'

In this tragic scene we see something that only Tolstoy is capable of, another example of which you will not find in any other work of literature. Tolstoy puts Anna's actions under a microscope and even at the very moment of her suicide describes how she was occupied with her red handbag (But the red handbag she was trying to throw off her arm kept her occupied and she was too late). Actually, Tolstoy is giving his reader a very important message in this paragraph. Anna, fully determined to take her own life, at the last minute changes her mind! But it is too late, there is no going back. She cannot pick herself up off the tracks. (and at the same time, as if preparing to stand up, with a slight movement of her body got up on her knees and tried to throw herself backwards... she felt it was impossible to struggle). Here Tolstoy is giving his reader a life lesson. If one day you are desperate and the idea of ending your own life crosses your mind, don't do it! When you regret it, it will be too late and there will be no going back.

There are important similarities between Russia's and the Ottoman Empire's struggles with Westernisation. Even though this process was much more acute in Russia we, as Turks, having experienced similar emotions, find it much easier to comprehend and internalise the Russian novel than a Western reader would.

19<sup>th</sup> century Russian literature will not offer us any solutions or any kind of road map. However, these novels make us ask the right questions.

