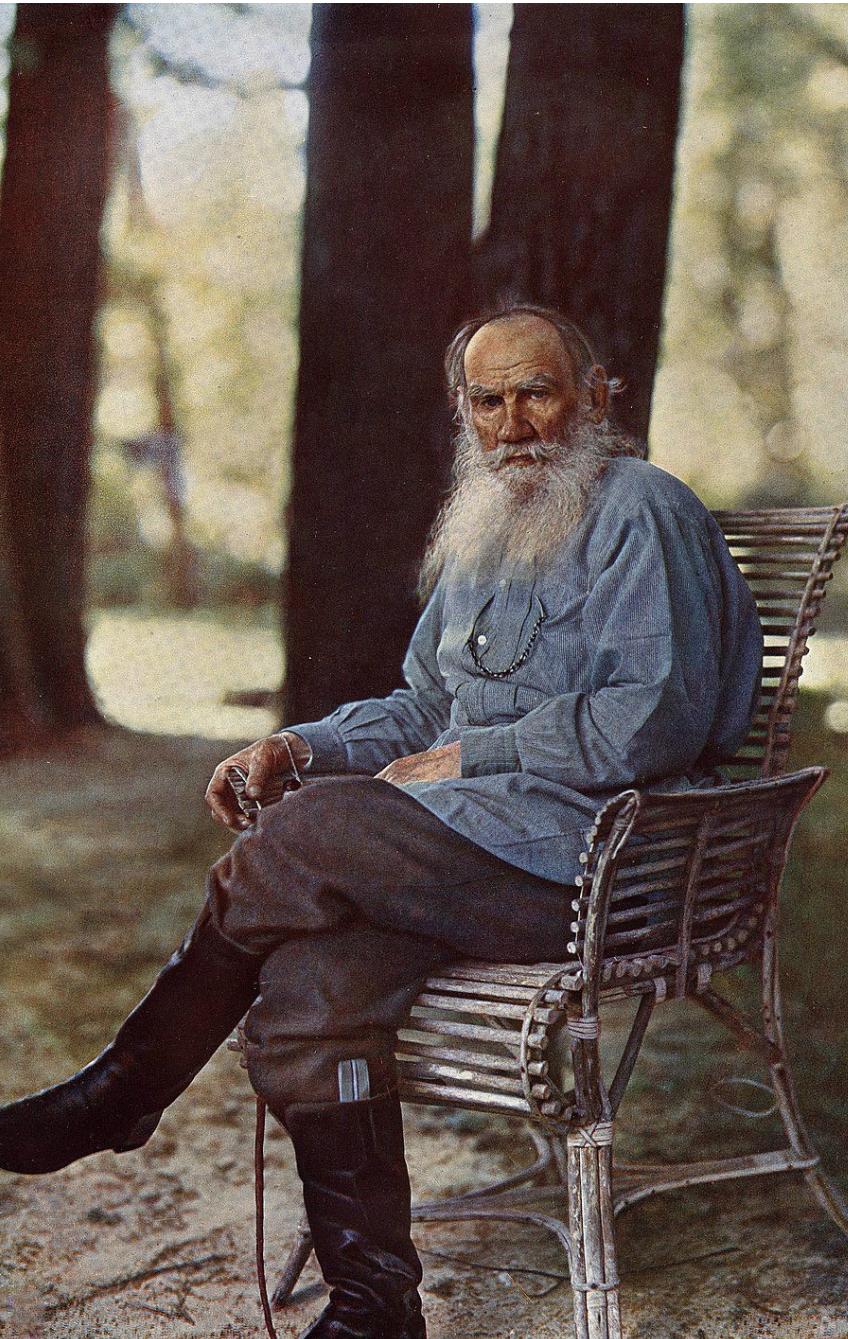




# LEV NIKOLAEVICH TOLSTOI

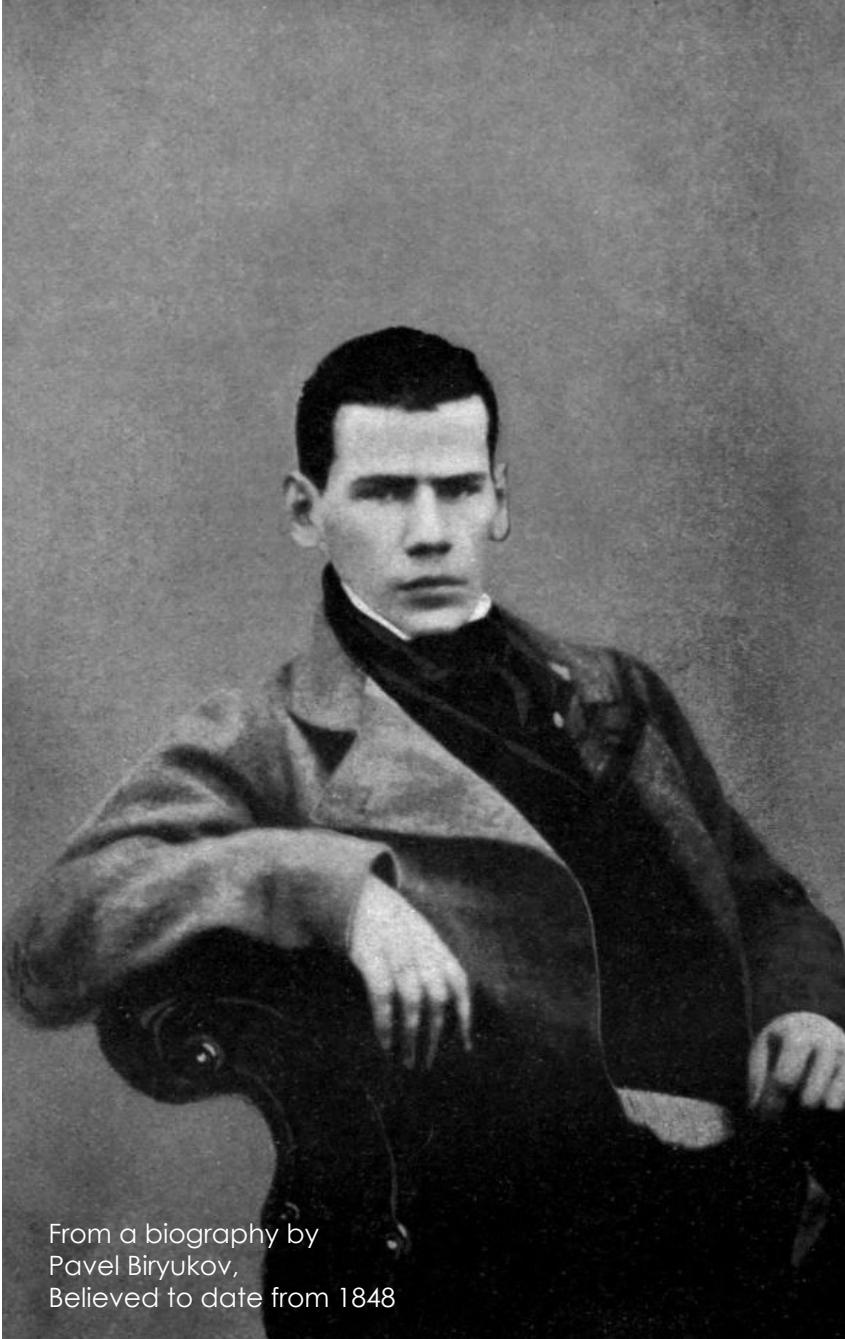
Readings in Russian Literature: The Nineteenth Century  
IIIT Hyderabad  
March 23, 2023



# Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoi (1828-1910)

- Count Lev Tolstoi / Leo Tolstoy
- Born at Yasnaya Polyana (4000 acres) near Moscow
- Belonged to an aristocratic family that dated back to the 14th cent.; ancestor made a Count by Peter I
- Father fought in the Patriotic War of 1812; mother a princess from the Volkonsky family
- Lost both his parents in childhood
- An indifferent student, dropped out of Kazan University
- Lived the life of the leisurely elite; also began to write

Tolstoy at Yasnaya Polyana, May 23, 1908  
(believed to be the first colour portrait in Russia)  
Sergey Prokudin-Gorsky  
Lithograph Print

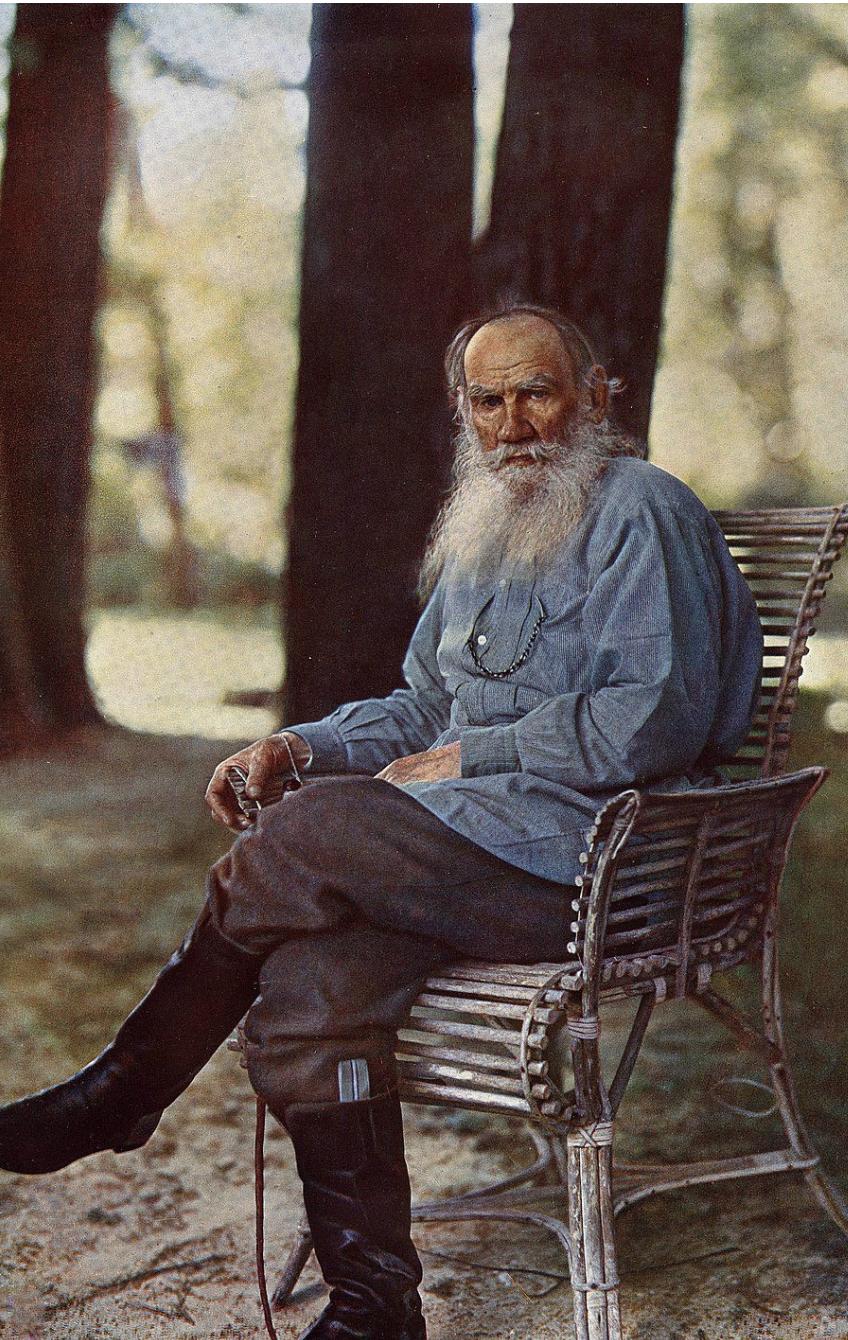


A black and white portrait of a young man, identified as Lev Tolstoi, sitting in a chair. He has dark hair and is wearing a dark coat over a light-colored cravat and a white shirt. His right hand rests on his chin, and his left hand is visible on his lap.

# Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoi (1828-1910)

- Having run up gambling debts, enlists in the army
- Serves in important military conflicts; shocked by brutality, swears by non-violence and refuses to serve the state in future
- Marries Sofya Andreevna Behrs; they have thirteen children, eight of whom survive
- Sofya, a diarist, copies and edits her husband's work, manages his finances
- In later life, Tolstoi experiences a profound moral crisis and spiritual awakening; he returns to basic Christian values and ethics
- Wants to renounce his wealth and assets, including copyrights to his works

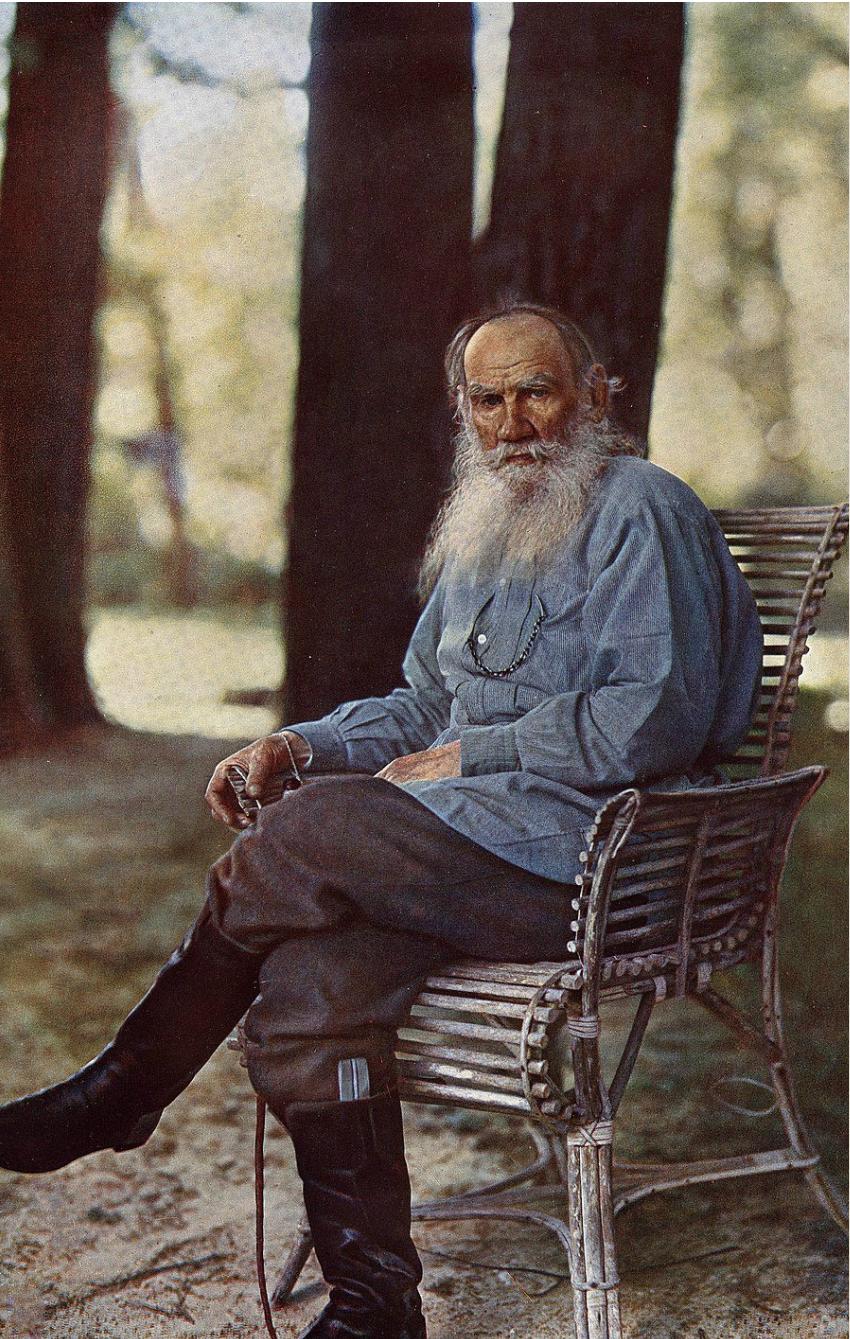
From a biography by  
Pavel Biryukov,  
Believed to date from 1848



# Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoi (1828-1910)

- *War and Peace* (1869)
- *Anna Karenina* (1877)
- *Resurrection* (1899)
- *Sevastopol Sketches* (1855-6)
- *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (1886)
- *The Kreutzer Sonata* (1889)
- *Hadjî Murat* (1912; posthumous)

...



# Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoi (1828-1910)

**“The young woman, greatly surprised on hearing this, turned and looked long and seriously at the hen, which was sitting with closed eyes beside the rooster in the chimney-corner. She asked the hen where it laid the egg. At the sound of her voice it simply opened and closed its eyes, but could make no answer.”**

# “A Spark Neglected” (1885)

- Generally considered “popular literature”:
  1. **folklore**, narrated by wandering minstrels/storytellers, later compiled/rewritten (Pushkin’s fairytales, Afanasy Afanasyev’s collections);
  2. formally educated writers writing about **folk or popular characters** – *Volksgeist* (J.G. von Herder) – Turgenev’s *A Hunter’s Notebook*.
  3. works created by writers specifically **for a popular audience**
    - commercial writing, since the 18th century
    - writings that were not produced with profit as a motive, but to increase the quality of popular literature available – Tolstoi’s tales and stories.



Лев Николаевич Толстой босой  
(Leo Tolstoy Barefoot; 1901)  
Ilya Repin  
Oil on Canvas

I see only three reasons [for the failure of contemporary writing for the popular audience]: one, that the satiated wish not to feed the hungry, but to deal with them in a way profitable to themselves; second, that the satiated do not want to give that which is their own food, but give only the leftovers, which even the dogs won't eat; third, that the satiated are not in fact as full as they imagine, but only inflated, and their own food is not that good. (PSS 25: 524)

Ladies and Gentlemen, writers of our native land, cast into our mouths mental sustenance which is worthy both of yourselves and of us; write for us, who thirst for the living literary word; save us from all of these Eruslan Lazareviches, Milord Georges [characters from popular chapbooks], and other such food from the bazaar.

(PSS 25: 526)

# “A Spark Neglected”

- Most suitable **theme** for popular writing for common people was the ethical teachings of Christ.
- **Language** should be poetically rich, but logical, straightforward, and without foreign words and syntax.
- Language close to that spoken by people on estates, ordinary people, **deliberate and pointed departure from literary practice**
  - Tolstoi had long believed
    - that standard Russian literary language was inferior to the Russian spoken by ordinary people, and
    - that our approach to popular literature was condescending.
  - “Who Should Learn to Write from Whom? The Peasant Children from Us, or We from the Peasant Children?” (1863, Yasnaya Polyana)



Лев Николаевич Толстой босой  
(Leo Tolstoy Barefoot; 1901)  
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# “A Spark Neglected”

- Re-invention of **Exemplum**, a medieval ecclesiastical genre, a story told as part of a sermon or homily to make a point about doctrine (Jahn 117).
- **Morality-tale**, a kind of medieval play in which people represent abstract concepts and drive a protagonist towards good or evil: temptation, fall, redemption.
- Similar also to **Parable**, a simple story (told by Christ) that illustrates a moral or spiritual lesson. Is this one a parable about the virtues of forgiveness and reconciliation?
- Tolstoi's understanding of the Sermon on the Mount is summarized into five teachings in an essay, the first of which is: “**Do not be angry**”

*(To some extent, these are also universal truths told with great economy.)*



Лев Николаевич Толстой босой  
(Leo Tolstoy Barefoot; 1901)  
Ilya Repin  
Oil on Canvas

# *The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant* (Matthew xviii: 21-35)



Jan Sanders van Hemessen

Oil on Panel

1556?



# Matthew xviii: 21-35

Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven. Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king, which would take account of his servants. And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought unto him, which owed him ten thousand talents. But forasmuch as he had not to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made.



## Matthew xviii: 21-35

The servant therefore fell down, and worshipped him, saying, Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. Then the lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and loosed him, and forgave him the debt. But the same servant went out, and found one of his fellow servants, which owed him an hundred pence: and he laid hands on him, and took him by the throat, saying, Pay me that thou owest. And his fellow servant fell down at his feet, and besought him, saying, Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. And he would not: but went and cast him into prison, till he should pay the debt.



## Matthew xviii: 21-35

So when his fellow servants saw what was done, they were very sorry, and came and told unto their lord all that was done. Then his lord, after that he had called him, said unto him, O thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me: shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellow servant, even as I had pity on thee? And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him. So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses.

# Tale-Like Features

- No sense of historical time. Outside historical time, in mythic time.
- Rhyming language, closer to the speech patterns of “the people”:  
**“Жить бы да жить Ивану с детьми. Да двор об двор жил с ним сосед ...”**
- Three sons, each in possession of things/attributes in descending order.  
**“He had three sons, who supported themselves by their own labor. The eldest was married, the second about to be married, and the youngest took care of the horses and occasionally attended to the plowing.”**

# Tale-Like Features

- Archetypes:
  - Wise old people
  - Rash young people
  - Quarrelsome women
  - Children who learn from the young
- Idyllic: happy peasants, content with their lot.

# Northrop Frye and the Archetype

- Archetypes are “recurring images or symbols that connect one text with another and constitutes a source of the intelligibility of the text.”
  - Archetypes are created by literary classics, which establish myths and metaphors in the imagination that become reference points in all literature and culture.

# Love Thy Neighbour

- One sin leads to another. The sin of anger leads to
  - Violence of language and action
  - Gossip and backbiting
  - Stealing
  - Falsehoods and lies
  - The constant threat of revenge
  - Violation of the vulnerable as well as sacred/sanctified ideas
    - Gavryl hits Ivan's pregnant daughter-in-law
    - Bribery of government officials
- It is only when Gavryl's basic human dignity is so fundamentally undermined by the possibility of a lashing that Ivan is forced to reflect.

*The old man sighed deeply as he said: "You, Ivan, are strong and free to go wherever you please, while I have been lying for years on the oven. You think that you know everything and that I do not know anything. No! you are still a child, and as such you cannot see that a kind of madness controls your actions and blinds your sight. The sins of others are ever before you, while you resolutely keep your own behind your back. I know that what Gavryl did was wrong, but if he alone should do wrong there would be no evil in the world. Do you think that all the evil in the world is the work of one man alone? No! it requires two persons to work much evil in the world. You see only the bad in Gavryl's character, but you are blind to the evil that is in your own nature. If he alone were bad and you good, then there would be no wrong."*





# Things to Consider

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- How does that consideration shape story-telling?
- Who is the moral anchor of this story? / What is the reader supposed to take away from the story?

# Portents of Things to Come

- The title of the story: УПУСТИШЬ ОГОНЬ — НЕ ПОТУШИШЬ. (“You will miss the fire if you don’t extinguish it” – “A fire should be extinguished in the beginning” – “A Spark Neglected Burns the House”)
- Gavryl’s reaction to the verdict, his threat, Ivan’s guilt, his father’s reprimand, advice, and caution

**"Very well; my spine will burn from the lashes, but something will burn with greater fierceness in Ivan's household before long."**

- The weather that night
- Ivan cannot get Gavryl’s threat out of his mind

**"Ivan remained standing by the gate in a gloomy mood, as he was unable to banish from his mind the harassing thoughts of Gavryl, which the latter's menacing words had inspired: 'Something will burn with greater fierceness in Ivan's household before long.'"**

- Ivan is more interested in catching Gavryl in the act than in saving his barns.

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