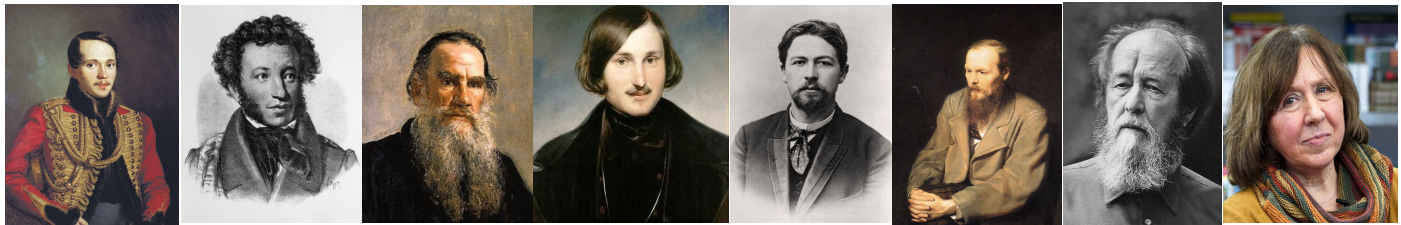


**21G.077 Introduction to the Classics of Russian Literature**

**Course Syllabus**

(Same subject as 21L.417; subject meets with 21G.618)

**T., Th., 2:30-4 p.m., 14N-217**



**“Literature is a condensed Universe.”**

“Литература – это сокращённая Вселенная.”

*Mikhail Saltykov-Schedrin*

Russian literature holds a universal appeal in the eyes of many generations of readers. In a listing by Great Books, 10 of 100 world’s greatest novels are by Russian authors. How do these writers convey the particularities of Russian culture and shape our understanding of Russia? How do they reflect the turbulent history of their land, yet capture imagination of readers around the globe? What are some unique ways in which they define human psychology, the quest for the meaning of life and self-realization in the world? In this course, we will explore the works of classical Russian writers of the nineteenth century, including stories and novels by Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Nabokov, and others. As we encounter different stories and storytellers, we will explore distinct literary voices and ways of constructing a character and representing an epoch, we will also discuss several overarching themes: freedom of self in society, fate and free will, love, loyalty, betrayal, and forgiveness. Though the focus on the course is on primary texts, we will also talk about some key historical events, as well as important details of the from the lives of the writers and poets whose work we will be exploring. Literature read in translation. Students interested in completing some readings and a short project in Russian for extra credit should register for 21G.618.

**Course Goals:**

- To explore classics of XIX and XX centuries, including novels, shorts stories, and some poems
- To be able to interpret literary works in connection with social, historical, and cultural issues
- To gain an understanding of most influential literary figures in Russian cultural history
- To enhance the understanding of Russian culture and society, both past and present
- To practice critical thinking skills, to become more astute readers and writers

**Requirements:**

- |  |     |
|--|-----|
| 1. <b>Attendance, completion of readings</b> (ranging 60-100 pages per week; more when we will be covering the novel); preparation for class discussion, active class participation  | 40% |
| 2. <b>5 short reader’s responses</b> (1-2 pp.), close reading of a passage or a story, analysis of a character or a theme. Details posted on Stellar.  | 30% |
| 3. <b>Final Project:</b> Reflections on Russian literature. General topics and questions will be provided; students will choose literary works and authors to discuss. The final project should involve a comparative angle (6-8 pp.). | 30% |

**Course website:** <https://stellar.mit.edu/S/course/21G/sp18/21G.077/index.html>

**Instructor contact information:** Maria Khotimsky ([khotimsk@mit.edu](mailto:khotimsk@mit.edu))

Office: 14N-224

Office hours: M., 1-2 p.m. and by appointment

## Course Policies and Assignment Outlines:

1. **Attendance** is mandatory. Please notify your instructor in case of illness or significant reason to miss class. More than 2 unexcused absences will lower your grade in the attendance category. Readings listed on the day of class must be completed before the class meetings. For longer readings, chapters for class discussion will be specified.
2. **Participation – Your voice matters!** Active class participation is an important part of your grade. Your responses and questions will help us engage with the texts on a deeper level. Discussion topics and questions about specific text will be circulated in class and posted on Stellar as assignments on the corresponding weeks. Read actively, and feel free to use notes to mark specific passages or details, and be able to share specific examples in class.
3. **5 reader responses (1-2 pp. each):** The goal of the reader's responses is to work closely with the text, analyzing ways of portraying the characters, structuring the narrative, defining the point of view, or representing a topic. These do not have to be fully argued papers, but they need to show your engagement with the text; responses can be in form of several chosen quotations + notes, commentaries, or reflections.
4. **Final Paper (5-7 pp.):** Final project should be set in a comparative context, reflecting on one of the general topics that were discussed over the course of the semester. You can choose to write about the novel, or about any 2 short stories of your choice. Sample themes include: representation of self and history; portrayal of social conflict; relationships and family histories; individual and society; questions of belief, doubt, rational and irrational. Guidelines for the project will be posted on Stellar.
5. **Your work should be your own:** our course is mainly focused on primary text, your responses should show that you are familiar with the material, and you are ready to share your impressions, thoughts, and questions. Final paper will include working with 2-3 supplementary critical sources.

Plagiarism is not tolerated – see the link below regarding MIT academic integrity policy:

<https://integrity.mit.edu/>

## Required Texts – available at the COOP

*Russian Short Stories from Pushkin to Buida*, transl. Robert Chandler (RSS in the reading list)  
(Penguin, 2005 ISBN 9780140448467)

Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*. Trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky  
(Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2002, ISBN 9780375702242)

Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich and Other Stories*. Trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky  
(Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2010, ISBN 9780307388865)

Anton Chekhov, *About Love and Other Stories*. Trans. Rosamund Bartlett (Oxford University Press, 2008)

*Course Readings on Stellar* - some texts will be uploaded as PDFs on Stellar, under corresponding weeks.

**Russian language option (21G.618):** Additional point of credit for completing some readings in Russian. Copies of the texts will be posted on Stellar; links to online versions of longer texts will be provided. A Russian discussion section can be arranged, pending student interest (1 hr. per week). The structure of the readings and discussions will depend on the group and the language level of participating students; tentative outline of readings is included on p. 7 of this syllabus.

**See the following pages for the schedule of readings and assignments**

## Week 1. Introduction to the Course. Pushkin

**Tuesday, Feb. 6:** Introductory lecture. Literature in Russian culture and society.

Read Iurii Buida's short story "Sinbad the Sailor" (PDF posted on Stellar and emailed to the class list)

**Thursday, Feb. 8:** Pushkin, *Belkin's Stories*, Introduction, "The Shot," "The Undertaker,"  
(PDF – *Stellar* + hard copies circulated in class).

**Questions for Thursday discussion:** What kind of narrator do we encounter in the introduction? How does he describe Ivan Petrovich Belkin, presumed author of the book? Who is the book's publisher, and who is its real author? Who are the main characters in each three texts, and what are the main events and conflicts? How would you describe the style of each story?

## Week 2. XIX Century: Lermontov, Gogol

**Tuesday, Feb. 13:** Mikhail Lermontov, *The Hero of Our Time*, Excerpts: "Foreword," "Bela,"  
"Maxim Maximych," "The Fatalist" (PDF, *Stellar*) ~62 pp.

**Thursday, Feb. 15:** Nikolai Gogol, "The Greatcoat" (*RSS*), "Nose" (*Stellar*) (PDF) ~50 pp.; you will pick one story to read in detail and to discuss in your response; skim the other story. Class discussion will incorporate your responses and address both stories.

**Reader's response #1: The role of the absurd in Gogol's stories** (fill in the details about the story you read; take some notes on the representation of space, the city, the people and the objects in the text)

## Week 3. Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*

**Tuesday, Feb. 20:** no class, Monday schedule. Start reading ahead, Read Dostoyevsky's Biography, 2pp.  
(PDF, *Stellar*); start reading the novel. ~125 pp.

**Thursday, Feb. 22:** Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot* (Part I, Chapters 1-11, pp. 88-125 in the Pevear/ Volokhonsky edition)

## Week 4. Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*

**Tuesday, Feb. 27:** Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot* (Part I, Chapters 12-16, pp.125-175 – until the end of Part I) ~50pp.

**Thursday, March 1:** Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot* (Part II, Chapters 1-5, pp. 179-236) ~57 pp.

## Week 5. Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*

**Tuesday, March 6:** Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*, Part II, Chapters 6-10 (pp. 236-301) ~65 pp.

**Thursday, March 8:** Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*, Part II, Ch. 11 and 12; Part III, Chapters 1-2 (pp. 301-353) ~52 pp.

**Response #2 (due 3/8): Dostoyevsky's style of character creation** – pick a character in the novel that you find particularly interesting and find specific examples in the text of how Dostoyevsky creates the image of this character – physical description, speech manner, interaction with others, conflicts and dramas, perceptions and misperceptions, memories and expectations. Be ready to share your responses in class.

## Week 6. Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*

**Tuesday, March 13:** Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*, Part III, Ch. 3-7 (pp. 353-424) ~71pp.

**Thursday, March 15:** Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*, Part III, Ch. 8-10 (424-457); Part IV, Ch. 1 (pp. 461-473) ~ 45 pp.

## Week 7. Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot* – concluding discussions

**Tuesday, March 20:** Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*, Part IV, Ch. 2-7 (pp. 474-555) ~ 95 pp.

**Thursday, March 22:** Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*, Part IV, Ch. 8-11; Epilogue, (pp. 555-615). ~50 pp.

**Response #3 (due 3/22):** “A novel of ideas” is a common definition of Dostoyevsky’s novels, while *The Idiot* has also often been called as “his most personal novel.” In your opinion, what are some key ethical, psychological, religious, or social themes of the novel? Which characters convey them and how? Choose 2 specific examples, illustrate them with text. Be ready to share your responses in class.

**Have a nice Spring Break! Read ahead: Tolstoy, *Haji Murad*; *The Death of Ivan Ilyich***

## Week 8. Tolstoy

**Tuesday, April 3:** Tolstoy, *Haji Murad* ~ 113 pp.

**Thursday, April 5:** Tolstoy, *Haji Murad*, continued. *War and Peace*, excerpts (PDF on Stellar)

## Week 9. Tolstoy; Chekhov

**Tuesday, April 10:** Tolstoy, *Death of Ivan Ilyich* ~60pp.

**Response # 4– due on Tuesday (4/10).**

Choose a character from Tolstoy’s texts we read and discuss which ethical, personal or emotional dilemmas he or she faces, and how does he or she change throughout the story. How are the moments of change portrayed? How does Tolstoy picture feelings and thoughts of the characters? How do his descriptions differ from Dostoyevsky’s? Give specific textual examples to support your point of view. Be ready to share your response in class.

**Thursday, April 12:** Chekhov’s biography (read through chronology of life, xxxii-xxxiv in Chekhov, *About Love and Other Stories*). Early short stories and sketches: “Fat and Thin,” “Grisha,” “Sleepy,” “Anyuta,” “Little Joke” PDF on Stellar ~ 25 pp.

## Week 10: Chekhov

**Tuesday, April 17:** **no class, Patriot’s day break.** Please read ahead for this week and next week.

**Thursday, April 19:** Chekhov, later stories: “The Man in a Case,” “Gooseberries,” “About Love.” In Chekhov, *About Love and Other Stories*, pp. 134-166.

## Week 11: Chekhov

**Tuesday, April 24:** Chekhov, *Lady with a Little Dog*, in Chekhov, *About Love and Other Stories*, pp. 166-183.

**Thursday, April 26:** Chekhov, late stories: “Rothschild’s Violin,” “The Student,” in Chekhov, *About Love and Other Stories*, pp. 93-107.

**Response # 5 (Due on Thursday, 4/26): Chekhovian detail.** Chekhov has often been called a master of artistic detail.

Looking at the stories you read so far, discuss the use of details and imagery in creating the mood and conveying the message of the story. What do these details add to the setting for the story and the dynamics of character development? Choose 2-3 specific examples from the stories we read (images, phrases), explain why this detail is significant and what function it has in the text.

## **Week 12: Russian Literature since the Revolution – the paths of development**

**Tuesday, May 1:** Responses to the Revolution and the Soviet times – the violent, the absurd, the new (Krzhizhanovsky, “Quadraturin,” pp. 208-217; stories by Babel and Zoschenko, *RSS*, pp. 236-258,).

**Thursday, May 3:** Russian Literature in Emigration: Vladimir Nabokov, *Spring in Fialta*, Ivan Bunin, *Cold Autumn* – PDF on Stellar) ~34 pp.

NB! Nabokov’s story will require some time due to the richness of his prose style. Please, look over the questions before and take some time to savor the story.

## **Week 13: Russian Literature of The XX Century – Trauma and Memory**

**Tuesday, May 8:** Literature of labor camps – Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, excerpts (PDF on Stellar, 16 pp.); Varlam Shalamov, “Through the Snow,” “Berries,” “The Snake Charmer,” “Duck” (*RSS*, pp. 320-333)

**Thursday, May 10:** World War II and the Post-War world in Russian literature: poetry of the Leningrad Siege (from the anthology *Written in the Dark* (PDF on Stellar); Andrei Platonov, “The Return” (*RSS*, pp. 268-297).

**Choose your final project topic**, as well as 2-3 critical sources, in addition to the main texts, by the end of this week (send me an email with your topic + choice of texts); let me know if you need help in identifying critical sources. Sample topics and guidelines, as well as some articles and excerpts from pertinent scholarly monographs will be posted on Stellar.

## **Week 14: Keeping the memory**

**Tuesday, May 15:** Joseph Brodsky, Nobel Prize Lecture, poems (Stellar); Sergei Dovlatov, *The Suitcase* (*RSS*, pp. 363-375 + PDF on Stellar)

**Thursday, May 17:** Svetlana Aleksievich, *The Second-Hand Time*, excerpts (PDF, Stellar); concluding discussion; sharing the topics of the final projects.  
Class party ☺

**Be ready to share the topic of your final project**, including **a brief statement about your analysis + 2**

**quotations from literary works that you plan to discuss in your final paper.**

## 21G.618 Introduction to the Classics of Russian Literature – Russian language option

This course option allows you to explore the texts in the original, and to expand your Russian reading and writing skills. We will devote special attention to questions of style, word choice, syntax, humor, allusions, as well as to the “untranslatable” aspects of the texts that we read. Russian readings will be posted on Stellar. On the weeks when we cover 2 authors, specific texts will be selected for the Russian discussion section. A preliminary schedule of readings is included below. We will pace the readings according to the level of the group, and we can also adjust the Russian reading choices depending on your interests and your language level. Pending student interest and availability, we will try to arrange a weekly discussion session.

### **Class requirements:**

- 1) Completion of 21G.077 requirements (readings and reader’s responses, short and long paper). If you would like, you can complete these in Russian.
- 2) Completion of designated readings in Russian, participation in discussion sessions. Work on new grammar and vocabulary elements from the texts (identify 5-10 words or expressions in your weekly readings that could be added to your active vocabulary; practice using these words – write out sample sentences or word combinations).
- 3) Short written response in Russian – 1p. (response to favorite story or episode from the novel) – describe the events of the story (characters, place, events, theme, similarities with other readings; say what you liked about it).

### **Расписание**

**Неделя 1:** Пушкин, стихотворения, Юрий Буйда, «Синбад-мореход»

**Неделя 2:** Лермонтов, «Фаталист», стихотворения

**Неделя 3:** Достоевский, *Идиот*, фрагменты

**Неделя 4:** Достоевский, *Идиот*, фрагменты

**Неделя 5:** Достоевский, *Идиот*, фрагменты

**Неделя 6:** Достоевский, *Идиот*, фрагменты

**Неделя 7:** Достоевский, *Идиот*, фрагменты

**Неделя 8:** Толстой, фрагменты из романов «Война и Мир» и «Анна Каренина»

**Неделя 9:** Толстой, «Смерть Ивана Ильича», фрагменты

**Неделя 10:** Чехов, «Мальчики»

**Неделя 11:** Чехов, поздние рассказы: фрагменты

**Неделя 12:** Набоков, «Весна в Фиальте» (фрагменты)

**Неделя 13:** Варлам Шаламов, «По снегу», «Ягоды», «Утка»

**Неделя 14:** Сергей Довлатов, *Чемодан*, фрагменты. Иосиф Бродский, стихотворения