

Carleton University
Fall 2024 Preliminary Course Outline
Department of English

ENGL 4600A/EURR 4103A
The Great Russian Novel (in English translation):
Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and
Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*

Prerequisite: fourth-year standing or permission from the department

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***** This is a preliminary syllabus only—texts and assignments are subject to change. A complete version will be available closer to the start of the term. *****

Comme l'on serait savant, si l'on connaissait bien seulement cinq à six livres!

Flaubert to Louise Colet, February 17, 1853

In a letter to his mistress, Flaubert remarked wistfully: “How knowledgeable one might be if one knew well only some half a dozen books!” Taking Flaubert’s remark seriously, this course examines two crowning achievements of nineteenth-century Russian literature through the lens of the nineteenth-century Russian history and culture that produced them and the lens of the twentieth-century world literature, theory, and philosophy that they inspired.

Following the Golden Age of poetry associated most intimately with the verse of Pushkin, Russian literature produced a second Golden Age, this time associated with prose. The novels of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky were greeted by writers all over the world as the finest in their genre. In *Aspects of the Novel*, E.M. Forster declared “No English novelist is as great as Tolstoy—that is to say, has given so complete a picture of man’s life, both on its domestic and heroic side. No English novelist has explored man’s soul as deeply as Dostoevsky.” At late as 1925, Virginia Woolf referred to Tolstoy as “the greatest of all novelists” for having written *War and Peace*. For Vladimir Nabokov, it was Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* that was “the supreme masterpiece of nineteenth-century literature.” Other twentieth-century figures bestowed even higher praise on Dostoevsky’s final novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*: Freud referred to it as “the most magnificent novel ever written” and Einstein confessed that it was “the most wonderful book I have ever laid my hands on.” Kafka acknowledged having been influenced by it (he referred to himself and Dostoevsky as “blood relatives”) and Wittgenstein is said to have read it so many times as to have learned entire passages by heart. Nabokov coined the term

“Tolstoevsky” to refer to Tolstoy’s and Dostoevsky’s outsized influence on world literature and culture, and Heidegger acknowledged having been influenced by them both.

We will read Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* and Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* by focusing on the “big questions” (Dostoevsky called them “accursed”) that obsessed nineteenth-century Russian writers: What is the meaning of life? Does God exist? What is the essence of humanity? What is evil? What happens after death? At the same time, we will range into the twentieth century by examining the reasons behind Tolstoy’s and Dostoevsky’s influence on Freud, Bakhtin, Heidegger, Camus, Wittgenstein and others.

Though both novels will be taught and read in English translation, Russian readers have the option of reading them in Russian and quoting from the original Russian texts in their written work. The course is designed to appeal to students in English, EURUS, SLALS, and—most important of all—to all voracious readers.

Students are encouraged to read as much in advance as they can. In an ideal world, students will read both novels before the beginning of the course and re-read them during the course according to the reading schedule. Such an ideal scenario would maximize retention, comprehension, and pleasure.

During my lectures, I will be citing passages from the editions listed below. Though students may use any editions they already have, I encourage students to purchase these particular editions (see images and descriptions below) because they are finely translated, closely annotated, and accompanied by useful secondary materials such as scholarly essays and extracts from the authors’ diaries and private correspondence. I have ordered these editions through Carleton’s Bookstore, but students are encouraged to purchase these texts as soon as possible to start reading them during the summer. Inexpensive used copies may be purchased at abebooks.com. For students who do not wish to purchase books, *Anna Karenina* and *The Brothers Karamazov* can also be read online free of charge. Russian readers may also read *Анна Каренина* ([Parts 1-4](#) and [Parts 5-8](#)) and *Братья Карамазовы* (<https://ilibrary.ru/text/1199/index.html>) online.

Learning Outcomes

This course was designed to achieve the following learning outcomes:

1. demonstrate cultural literacies that engage with the transnational, multilingual, and historical traditions of literary production
2. read and analyze texts accurately, contextually, and critically
3. conduct independent textual research
4. recognize and apply a range of methodological frameworks in a critical and self-reflective manner
5. write clearly and persuasively in a variety of genres, while advancing and supporting arguments
6. express ideas clearly, persuasively, and collegially in a variety of oral formats.

Terms of Evaluation

Grade Distribution: 10% first essay (2-3 pages; 12-point font; double spaced); 10% annotated bibliography (minimum of five scholarly sources); 35% formal essay (7-8 pages, 12-point font; double spaced); 25% five unannounced quizzes; 20% take-home exam.

NB: Students who miss *six* or more classes will not be eligible to submit work and will therefore fail the course.