

Leo Tolstoy

Reading and Discussion

Leo Tolstoy was a Russian intellectual and novelist who is considered one of the greatest writers of all time. He was born in 1828 in the **Tula** region of **Russia**. Tula, one of the oldest cities in Russia, is located about 200 kilometers south of Moscow. The Tolstoy family was a member of the aristocracy, and they moved to Moscow to allow their children to attend school. While in school, Tolstoy studied languages. His parents died when he was young, and in 1851, Tolstoy joined the **Russian Army**.

During this time, Tolstoy began writing. He wrote several novels including **Childhood**, **Boyhood**, and **Youth**, which were mostly autobiographical. In 1855, he left the army, deeply saddened by the loss of two of his brothers to **tuberculosis**. Tuberculosis was a common disease at that time. It was called consumption because it damaged the lungs. Tolstoy was uncertain what to do with his life during this period, and he spent some time founding thirteen schools for underprivileged children. Unfortunately, he also spent time gambling and accruing debt.

In 1862, Tolstoy married **Sofia ‘Sonya’ Behrs**. Sofia was the daughter of a court physician and was not yet twenty years old when she married Tolstoy. The couple had twelve children, one of whom died soon after being born. Tolstoy became very involved in writing, and Sofia would often assist him by sorting his papers and managing the affairs of their estate. During their first year of marriage, Tolstoy began his novel **War and Peace**.

War and Peace was finally published in 1869. The novel is extremely long and covers a broad range of subjects. The setting is Russia during the wars with France in the Napoleonic era, and the storyline depicts the struggles and events of five Russian upper-class families from 1805 to 1812. Due to the large scope of the novel, it has many characters, some of whom were real people (like **Napoleon**) and others who are fictional (like **Prince Andrei Nikolayevich Bolkonsky**). Tolstoy worked very hard at researching the historical aspects of his novel, so it is considered historical fiction. He also drew from his experiences in the **Crimean War**.

In 1873, Tolstoy began writing his next novel, **Anna Karenina**, which was published in full in 1878. This is also a very long novel that is divided into eight parts. Its opening line is very famous and often quoted: “All happy families are alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” Many people believe that Tolstoy was referring to his own family life. Through two of the characters, **Anna Karenina** and **Konstantin Levin**, Tolstoy’s novel explores the emotional turmoil in society. Tolstoy himself was very critical of his novel.

From 1879 to 1901, Tolstoy published many smaller works, both novels and non-fiction. In most of these works, Tolstoy criticizes the **Russian Orthodox Church** and the **Russian government**. He decided to live according to his interpretation of Christianity and became a pacifist. During this time, he also exchanged correspondence with

Name _____

Date _____

Gandhi. The two men discussed living moral lives and also the merits of pacifism. Gandhi often credited Tolstoy with his impetus for becoming an activist for non-violence.

Even though Tolstoy was a member of the nobility, he believed his new ideas regarding peace and vegetarianism meant renouncing his claims to inheritance. He decided to deny his inheritance and gave what money he could to charity and the poor. In October of 1910, Tolstoy ventured out of his home to begin a lifestyle as a wandering ascetic. He died of pneumonia in November of that year.

Name _____

Date _____

Activities

Activity A: Multiple Choice:

1. Tolstoy was a _____ novelist:

- a. Russian
- b. French
- c. English
- d. Italian

2. Tolstoy died from:

- a. tuberculosis
- b. consumption
- c. pneumonia
- d. food poisoning

3. "All happy families are alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way" is a quote from:

- a. War and Peace
- b. Anna Karenina
- c. Youth
- d. Napoleon's Demise

4. Tolstoy's wife was named:

- a. Katherine
- b. Anna
- c. Isabel
- d. Sofia

Activity B: True or False:

____ 1. The Tolstoy family was made up of beggars and serfs.

____ 2. In 1851, Tolstoy joined the Russian Army.

____ 3. The same year that he was married, Tolstoy began his novel Anna Karenina.

____ 4. Tolstoy believed his new ideas regarding peace and vegetarianism meant renouncing his claims to inheritance.

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Answer Key

Activity A

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- c. English
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2. Tolstoy died from:

- a. tuberculosis
- b. consumption
- c. **pneumonia**
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3. "All happy families are alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way" is a quote from:

- a. War and Peace
- b. **Anna Karenina**
- c. Youth
- d. Napoleon's Demise

4. Tolstoy's wife was named:

- a. Katherine
- b. Anna
- c. Isabel
- d. **Sofia**

Activity B

 F 1. The Tolstoy family was made up of beggars and serfs.

 T 2. In 1851, Tolstoy joined the Russian Army.

 F 3. The same year that he was married, Tolstoy began his novel Anna Karenina.

 T 4. Tolstoy believed his new ideas regarding peace and vegetarianism meant renouncing his claims to inheritance.