

Philosophy, Class, Society and Forgiveness in The Select Works of Leo Tolstoy

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Abstract: Leo Tolstoy is an acclaimed Russian writer His works have been regarded as being extremely influential to multiple generations of writers who came after him. His most successful works are War and Peace and Anna Karenina, which fall into the genre of realist fiction. This paper studies his most critically acclaimed works.

Keywords: Leo Tolstoy, War and Peace, Anna Karenina, The Death of Ivan Ilyich, Childhood.

I. Introduction

Leo Tolstoy is an acclaimed Russian writer His works have been regarded as being extremely influential to multiple generations of writers who came after him. He has been nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature and the Nobel Peace Prize. He has been prolific in the writing of novels, plays children's literature and short stories. His most successful works are War and Peace and Anna Karenina, which fall into the genre of realist fiction.

II. War and Peace

War and Peace is considered to be one of the greatest novels of world literature. The novel is set amidst the Napoleonic wars, and is therefore a historical novel. The book portrays France's invasion of Russia. The novel is remarkable for its inclusion of philosophical discussions. This invasion of Russia depicted in the novel occurred in 1812. The quest for the meaning of life, love and family are the main themes. European culture is depicted at length in the novel.

III. Anna Karenina

Anna Karenina, written by Tolstoy, was first published in 1878. This novel is regarded one of the finest pieces of literature ever written. The novel is set in Imperial Russia. Imperial Russia was one of the biggest empires in history, along with the British Empire. The contrast between rural and urban lifestyles are beautifully portrayed. Anna has an extramarital affair with Count Alexei and they flee. Love, family, passion and jealousy are the dominant themes.

IV. The Death of Ivan Ilyich

The Death of Ivan Ilyich was published in 1886. It is a novella and is critically claimed as one of his best works. This novel is comprised of philosophical fiction. Philosophical fiction tries to explore the multiple aspects of the human condition, purpose of life, role of society etc. The titular protagonist is a high court judge in the nineteenth century and dies of a terminal illness. Mortality and the purpose of life are the main themes.

V. Childhood

Childhood is a famous novel by Tolstoy and published in 1852. The novel was a huge success and depicts the life of Nikolenka, a young boy. The novel is semi-autobiographical and charts the maturation and growth of an individual. Nikolenka's mother passed away when he was just ten years old. Internal monologues are common in the novel, with joy, sadness and growth being the main themes.

VI. Resurrection

Resurrection is the last novel written by Tolstoy. Published in 1899, it is known for its philosophical and political fiction. Dimitri is a nobleman who seeks redemption for his sin. He had sexually assaulted and impregnated a ward, Katyusha. This leads to a series of unfortunate events and Katyusha ends up as a prostitute to support herself. Thus, the the protagonist goes through a moral struggle and wants to atone for his sin. Redemption is the central theme of the novel.

VII. What Men Live By

What Men Live By is a short story by Tolstoy, published in 1885. The story revolves around the life of a poor couple, Simon and Matryona. An angel had fallen on earth and understands the power of love amongst humans. The angel is named Michael. He is cast out of heaven and falls on earth for disobeying God. Religion, poverty and selfless love are the main themes.

VIII. After The Ball

After The Ball is a short story by Tolstoy. This short story was published in 1911. Ivan Vadilievich, the protagonist is infatuated with the Colonel's daughter, Varenka B. While wandering the street, he witnesses the flogging of the Tartar (Turkish ethnic group). Varenka's father, Colonel B., oversees the flogging. Ivan witnesses state terror for the first time and is shocked by the brutality, and his infatuation slowly comes to an end. Good versus evil, the power of the state, high culture and the expectations of society are the common themes.

IX. A Prisoner of The Caucasus

A Prisoner of The Caucasus is a novel written by Tolstoy. Published in 1872, the story is based on a real incident in his life. The novel depicts the lives of two soldiers, who are kidnapped for ransom by their rivals. They try to escape, and the second attempt to do so is successful. The novel portrays humanity in the face of difficult situations. The novel deals with identity, culture and war being the main themes.

X. A Confession

A Confession, written by Tolstoy, was published 1884. Tolstoy struggled with understanding the meaning of life and hence wrote a confession. In the beginning, he says that he wrote in order to provide for his family. He further adds that even though he had money, fame and a family with him, he was struggling to understand the meaning of life. He says that life inevitably leads to death, and that the meaninglessness of life constantly disturbs him. Existential crisis is the focal point of the work.

XI. Boyhood

Boyhood is the second novel of Tolstoy, published in 1854. The novel portrays the life of an adolescent Nikolenka. He struggles with his identity and tries to understand the adult world. The turbulence of adolescence is captured by Tolstoy. The expectations of society and Nikolenka's internal conflicts are depicted. He encounters academic pressure and the presence of social hierarchies. Love, friendship and morality are the core themes.

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