Leo Tolstoy

A BRIEF-BIOGRAPHY & CONTRIBUTIONS TO ENGLISH LITERATURE

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**Introduction:**

Leo Tolstoy was a Russia born writer and poet and is regarded as the world's greatest poet and novelist. The one of the legacies of the poet is the culmination of the Realist Fiction that he achieved with the publication of his two masterpieces War and Peace and Anna Karenina. In his later life, Leo explored many talents and emerged as an essayist, education reformer and an excellent dramatist and gained reverence as the most influential member of the noble Tolstoy family. His ideas on non-violence made him a devoted Christian anarchist and pacifist and he renounced the authority of Orthodox Church in 1901. Though he never called himself an anarchist, his later teachings can be classified as Christian anarchism. His much acclaimed book The Kingdom of God is Within You which came in 1893, is a mirror of his religious and ethical teachings.

**Childhood & Early Life**

Leo Tolstoy was born on 28 August 1828 at Yasnaya Polyana in Central Russia in a noble Russian family. He was the fourth child of Maria Volkonsky and Nicolay Ilvich Tolstoy. His mother died when he was two. Tolstoy further lost his father at the age of nine and went on to stay with his aunt Madame Ergolsky. In 1844, he enrolled into Kazan University to study Turco-Arabic literature, but dropped out in the middle of a term in 1847. According to his autobiography, he was frustrated and committed every crime of drinking, gambling and visiting brothels in his pursuit for pleasure. Addicted to gambling, he had to sell out most of his father’s inheritance.
He returned to his birth place at Yasnaya Polyana in a hope to educate and help the peasants working in his estates. It did not amuse him for long and in 1851; he accompanied his elder brother Nikolay to Chechnya to join the military service where he joined an artillery unit battalion in Chechnya as a volunteer of private rank. While serving in the army, Tolstoy began writing short stories and had faced several rejections before his first novel Childhood was published in 1852. The book proved to be an immediate success and catapulted him in the front row of Russian writers. Encouraged by the success of Childhood, which was a reflection of his own childhood, he continued with Boyhood and Youth. He further wrote the battlefield observation based on his experience in the army.

**Evolution as a Writer**

With his growing success as a writer, Tolstoy became a renowned name in the literary world. He left army in 1855 and between the years 1856-1861, he traveled to many foreign countries. In 1857, he again traveled to European countries and wrote his experience there in his book Lucerne and Three Deaths and Kholstomer. During this period he emerged as an education reformer and in 1859, Tolstoy established a school for peasants’ children at Yasnaya. He also wrote several stories for them and took a keen interest in teaching these unprivileged people.

However, a turning point came in his life when his elder brother died on 20 September 1860, which shattered him. Tolstoy described the incident as devastating and his first encounter with the preordained reality of death. Deeply profound by his brother’s death, Tolstoy began to lose
his mental stability and often confessed his remorse in his personal diary. This state continued for at least one year till 1861. After getting over his shock and grieves, Tolstoy accepted the honorary post of Justice of the Peace in 1861.

**Marriage & Family Life**

At the age of thirty four, Tolstoy fell in love and married Sofia Andreyevna Behrs on 24 September 1862. During their courtship, Tolstoy gave his personal diaries to Sofia as he wanted her to learn of his faults before they married. Though she consented to the marriage, she could not get over the shocking content of the diaries for the rest of her life.

However in other matter, Sofia proved a good wife and a great help to his literary work. She assisted him with business correspondence, writing drafts and organizing his rough notes. His marriage gave him a moral stability and for the next fifteen years he remained in what he called, ‘a natural state’. The couple had 12 children, five of whom died in their childhood.

**Major Writing Works**

Tolstoy began to write his masterpiece War and Peace in 1862 and six volumes of the book were published between the year 1863 and 1869. His started his next classic Anna Karenina in 1873, which was a reflection of his own married life, and was first published in the Russian Herald in 1876. Throughout his life, Tolstoy felt an insatiable thirst for a realistic and moral justification of
life and it remained the centre of his literary works. During this period he experienced his deepest fear of self questioning and self criticizing as father and husband.

He harshly disparaged himself for his egoistical concerns and self interest. These thoughts left him in depths of despair and a state of moral crisis. Overwhelmed by the bouts of remorse and grief upon his previous life, he wrote his Confession in 1879. He further wrote a number of books, criticizing the Orthodox Church and government. Moving on to philosophical and spiritual topics, he authored books such as A Criticism of Dogmatic Theology (1880), A Short Exposition of the Gospels’ (1881), What I Believe (1882), and What Then Must We Do? (1886).

Conversion and Last Days of Tolstoy

In his later life, Tolstoy preached non-violence, vegetarianism and chastity. He himself gave up meat, alcohol and tobacco, and embraced the teaching of Jesus. His book The Kingdom of God is Within You which came in 1893, is a mirror of his religious and ethical teachings. Tolstoy renounced the authority of Orthodox Church in 1901, and though he never called himself an anarchist, his later teachings can be classified as Christian anarchism.

By this time, he had become increasingly interested in the subject of life and death and authored books such as How much land does a man need, War and Peace and Kholstomer, examining the complexity of relationship between life and death. After his excommunication in 1901, he
became known as a Christian anarchist, and his teaching were somehow related to communism. As his reputation grew immensely, he began to attract followers from across the country and people began to preach Tolstoy’s religious doctrines known as ‘Tolstoyaism’.

Death

Tolstoy renounced his father’s inheritance and surrendered all his land assets to his wife, who refused to give up her possessions. While his own life had become extremely bitter and painful with his wife Sofia, the only member who did not show hostility towards his teachings, was his youngest daughter Alexandra. In a hope to start a new life away from his wife, Tolstoy left home with his daughter Alexandra on 28 October 1910 and headed for a convent where his sister lived. The journey was cut short as he fell ill on the way near a train station and eventually died on 20 November 1910. In accordance with his wishes, he was buried in a simple coffin near Yasnaya Polyana.
Leo Tolstoy Timeline:

1828- Leo Tolstoy was born on 28 August.

1844- He enrolled into Kazan University.

1847- He dropped out of the University.

1851- He went to Chechnya to join the military service.

1852- His first novel Childhood was published.

1855- He left army.

1859- Tolstoy established a school for peasants’ children at Yasnaya.

1860- His elder brother Nikolay died on 20 September.

1861- Tolstoy became Justice of the Peace.

1862- He married Sofia Andreyevna Behrs on 24 September.

1863- His masterpiece War and Peace was first published.

1876- Anna Karenina was first published in the Russian Herald.

1879- He wrote his confession.

1893- The Kingdom of God is Within You was published.

1901- Tolstoy renounced the authority of Orthodox Church.
1910- Tolstoy left home with his daughter Alexandra on 28 October.

1910- He died on 20 November.