Russian Literature from Pushkin to Dostoevsky

The course is summarized and its aims are set forth:

This course is a literature seminar. It will teach us to become more appreciative, perceptive, and understanding readers, and to communicate our experience of literary texts in a compelling way.

In the process, we will touch upon questions of Russian history and culture, literary and intellectual tradition, philosophy and ethics and religion. How do we account for the extraordinary, unprecedented outburst of creativity in 19th century Russia? Why do we read these books more than a hundred years after they were written, and what skills do we need to have as readers if we are to understand and enjoy artworks that were created in a different language and in a different time? How do these works engage philosophy and social thought, and how do these aspects relate to their literary form? Why do we read fiction—which is a polite word for things that are not true, or at least not true in the usual sense—and what can fiction do that other kinds of writing cannot?

These questions are just for starters. There will be many more questions, and you will pose most of them yourselves. For some of these questions you will develop good working answers. In other cases you will only open the door onto knotty knots of complex issues. But by the end of the semester you will have read and understood the major prose works of what is called the “Golden Age of Russian Literature,” and you will have a firm foundation in the historical context and literary concepts necessary to understand works like them. Indeed, you will know the fundamentals of literary analysis: you will be able to devise your own strategies of reading, to engage any text at all in a nuanced fashion, and to articulate the results of your engagement to other people in a powerful, convincing way. You will also learn how to duel with pistols.

Concerning class requirements, to wit:

As your teacher, I will present you with the most important issues in and approaches to the study of Russian literature and culture. In return, you will provide me with lively, engaged conversation for two and a half hours a week. Alongside airing your questions and discussing your own take on the readings, you need to listen to and carefully consider the ideas set forth by other members of the class.

Obviously, in order to have a take on the readings, you first have to read them. Because this is a survey course intended to provide a broad exposure to Russian literature, there is a great deal of reading—usually about 200 pages a week. However, we are reading almost exclusively novels, many of them quite good novels, and most weeks the page count will go by pretty quickly. Equally obviously, in order to discuss anything at all, you have to be in class. More than one absence will adversely affect your grade.

If discussion lags, I may require assignments intended to facilitate conversation and to help you develop a language for talking about literature. Such assignments might include pop quizzes, weekly informal responses on the course website, or pages of questions in response to each reading. However, if you prove capable of engaging the texts on your own and sharing your insights, there will be no need for additional written work.

Speaking of assignments: in addition to two in-class exams and a take-home final essay exam, there will be a 6-8 page paper due October 22. We will talk about the exams and the essay in detail as the deadlines approach. Remember that good writing consists largely of good reading, and that I expect you to pay the same kind of careful, critical attention to your own essays as to Pushkin, Gogol, and Dostoevsky. If I feel that the papers are not as good as they might be, I will require a second draft.
Needless to say, I am always willing to meet with you to go over drafts or talk through the direction of a paper, or indeed to be helpful in any way I can. I will be in 515 Ballantine Hall pretty much all day Monday and Wednesday, and will always be available right after class. Remember that I have office hours specifically in order to be available to YOU. They are not very interesting if no one shows up. So even if there are no pressing crises, I encourage you to drop by to discuss your reading, your writing, or just to play a friendly game of backgammon.

_On grading, viz._:

Midterm 1 - 15%
Midterm 2 - 15%
Take home essay final - 25%
Midterm paper – 25%
Class participation and attendance – 20%

_Required texts and readings:_

The following texts are readily available at the IU bookstore (and other fine bookstores). They are also on reserve at Wells Library:

Nikolai Gogol, *Dead Souls*. Yale UP.
Karolina Pavlova, *A Double Life*. Barbary Coast.
Ivan Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons*. Oxford World Classics.
Leo Tolstoy, *Childhood, Boyhood, Youth*. Penguin.

All other readings will be distributed in class or made available on line. If you know Russian, you are of course encouraged to read these texts in the original language; if you plan on reading them in a different translation than the one listed here, please check with me first.

_Schedule:_

Mon., August 20 – Introductory discussion; reading to be distributed in class.

...here we start talking about the myth of St. Petersburg, uncanny freakish events and double worlds...


Aug. 27 – Nikolai Gogol, “Notes of a Madman,” “Nevsky Prospect.”
Aug. 29 – Nikolai Gogol, “The Overcoat,” “The Nose.”

...here we start thinking more about power relationships—

between St. Petersburg and the periphery of the empire,
parents and children, men and women, free people and slaves,
soldiers and subject peoples, and so on...

Sept 3 – LABOR DAY, no class.


Oct. 1 – Karolina Pavlova, *Double Life*.

Oct. 3 – **MIDTERM EXAM!**


...and here is where we start talking about the kind of “Russian novel” that most people think of when they say “Russian novel...”


**Attention: MIDTERM PAPER DUE!**

Oct. 24 – Leo Tolstoy, “Childhood.”


Oct. 31 – Ivan Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons* ch. 22-end.

Nov. 5 – Nikolai Leskov, “Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk.”

Nov. 6 – Gosh, don’t you have a civic duty to perform today? What is it...hmm...oh yes! It is voting day!

Nov. 7 – Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground*, pt. I.

Nov. 12- Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground*, pt. II

**Nov. 14 – MIDTERM EXAM!**

...and here we read a really big book, the kind of doorstop full of drama and degradation for which Russian literature is famous...

**THANKSGIVING NOV 18-25**


**Dec. 10 – Take home final due.**

...Russian literature does not of course end here, but we will, with a take home essay exam on terms to be announced when the time is ripe...