

Classic Russian Short Stories Spring, 2026

Syllabus

The 1800s saw a flowering of Russian literature, noted most widely for the novel. However, it also saw the birth of the short story genre. A handful of Russian authors not only introduced the genre, but their stories also are still considered some of the best in the genre. They are known for depicting a broad spectrum of Russian life, including not just the upper classes, but also giving equal respect to the tradesmen and peasants. Although seemingly apolitical, they can be seen as subtly challenging the repressive political status quo of their time. We are familiar with some of these authors, such as Chekov, Turgenev, Gogol, and Tolstoy, but are not likely to have read stories by others less well known in the West. In this class we will read a sampling of stories by authors whose works represent the flowering of the short story form of fiction.

Course Format

Each week we will discuss two stories, or three, as some stories are short, 55 minutes for each presentation. Participants will choose a story, or stories, to present, selecting from the attached list of stories, in which some of the shorter stories are grouped. The presentation should include an introduction to the author(s), their place in the Russian short story pantheon, a brief summary of the main plot of the story, and some analysis of the story. A request not to lead the discussion of a story will be respected, but participants will find that preparing to lead the discussion brings out elements and perspectives that one may not have appreciated on a less focused read. The presenter will guide the class discussion based on 5-6 questions addressing issues for each story such as the role of the setting, character and plot development, themes, use of symbols, and the author's point of view and writing style. These questions are to be prepared ahead of time and emailed to the Course Coordinator by the Thursday before the presentation date so that they can be distributed to class members a few days prior to the class.

Suggestions for analyzing short stories to help with developing discussion questions will be distributed prior to the first class. A helpful resource is George Saunderson's book, "*A Swim in the Pond in the Rain*", in which he shows how to analyze a short story using Russian short stories as examples.

Resources/Expense

The text is *Best Russian Short Stories, Various*, Alpha Editions (2021) edited by Thomas Seltzer. It is available from local bookstores new for about \$19, or used for about \$13 or less from either alibris.com or bookshop.org, both of which sites support independent book stores.

Coordinator: Patricia Becker, Emerita Professor, University of Wisconsin-Madison, has coordinated a number of previous LLC short story classes. Contact: ptbecker@wisc.edu, 608-320-7166.

