

How 'in the first circle'
exemplifies the "deep
humanity" of russian
literature: ...



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Although written through the lens of the Soviet prison system, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *In the First Circle* can be considered a truly timeless classic Russian novel, in the sense that it asks many of the same great and immortal questions that authors such as Tolstoy and Dostoevsky have asked, informed by its own historical moment. Depictions of quotidian life and morality parallel those found in earlier novels, in addition to the author's use of typical Russian 'folk hero' character types. In his own way, Solzhenitsyn combines these two strands of Russian literature to contribute to Russian literary humanism, doing so within his contemporary historical and personal context.

The essence of Max Heyward's view of Russian literature's "deep humanity" is expressed in many respects in Solzhenitsyn's *In the First Circle*, a sensibility which will frame the novel within the historical and literary context explored throughout the course. Solzhenitsyn's idea of Russian humanity is explored through character and images of nostalgia for the 'old' Russia, one that is discovered and rediscovered by characters as they return to old churches or visit peasant villages. Within the ranks of the MGB guard officers, Nadelashin, with his "native kindheartedness" (Solzhenitsyn, page 188), is himself the offspring of a line of tailors, whose "pleasant and undemanding work" (S. page 190) echoes Pasternak's obsession with laundry and life as quotidian work, or Nikolai Rostov's final scenes on the farm in *War and Peace*. The elements of what makes "a good man" (Gerstein, December 2018) are further developed in the folk wisdom of the characters Spiridon and Uncle Avenir, whose wisdom on family and peasant morality influence much of the self-sacrificing actions of those characters

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they meet. It is necessary of course to connect this “ deep humanity” with the experience of Russian peasant life and the discovery of nature (as opposed to culture). When Innokenty asks “ Is this the real Russia?” (S. page 302), we see this high-flying urban diplomat escape his world of Griboyedov-esque official luxury and ‘ parquet floors’, and for the first time enters into nature, into perhaps one of Kondrashov’s landscape paintings. A distinctly Christian element is explored as well, one that indeed connects to the regime’s stance on religion over the preceding decades; the mud-caked slabs of marble (S. page 309) are an allegory to the regime’s desecration of the Orthodox church, whose bell tower Klara and Volodin had just seen unmolested from a distance.

The themes of Russian literary humanity, slavophilia, and the exploration of volkish and peasant ideals runs throughout the span of Russian literature, and inform the use of these themes in *In the First Circle* to serve the novel’s own polemical purpose and historical moment. One can see clear parallels for example between Natasha’s dance at Uncle’s hunting lodge in *War and Peace*, to scenes such as chapter 58’s “ A Banquet of Friends”, and between Tolstoy’s and Paternak’s exaltation of Russian nature (versus their critiques of its culture) and Nerzhin’s assessment of Kondrashov-Ivanov’s paintings (such as *Morning of an Unusual Day*) as being themselves “ Russia” (S. page 331). The banquet is a salient moment in Solzhenitsyn’s novel, as Nerzhin remarks upon “ that true human greatness” (S. page 410) that ironically only freely exists in the *Sharashka*. We might compare Pierre’s companion Platon Karataev, someone who denied self-aggrandizement and lived neither in past nor future, to someone like Spiridon, who “ loved ... the land” and to <https://assignbuster.com/how-in-the-first-circle-exemplifies-the-deep-humanity-of-russian-literature-depictions-of-slavophilia-and-spiritual-character-transformations/>

whom everything “ meant family” (S. page 505). The importance of family, seen in Uncle Avenir and indeed with Gleb, whose soul he had “ left...behind” with his wife (S. page 657), is a facet of that Russian deep humanity that is most similarly explored by Pasternak. “ Life” as defined by Pasternak in Dr. Zhivago centers on family, one that represents the dual concepts of nature and Russia in characters like Lara (Gerstein, fall 2018) and in Zhivago’s Tartar half-brother, who both represent an East-centric and slavophilic understanding of what “ Russia” and its deep humanity means.

In spite of the clear inspiration for In the First Circle from the vast portfolio of the Russian literary tradition, we can also draw connections to the author’s own experience in the Soviet prison system, and thus in his own unique way makes a mark on that “ deep humanity” of Russian literature. Himself a survivor of what he calls “ The Gulag Archipelago”, Solzhenitsyn inflects Innokenty Volodin’s regime questioning, incarceration, and transformation with his own experience after his arrest under Article 58 for critiquing Stalin in his letters. We might suggest that Volodin’s rash decision to phone the American embassy in the first chapter reflects Solzhenitsyn’s own disillusionment with and futile resistance against the Soviet regime, indeed reflecting the culmination of a Kronstadt-esque moment in the manner of The God that Failed. Volodin’s depiction of surrender and submission of his ego in the face of his “ crude, stupid, and ineluctable” arrest (S. page 687) shows a sacrifice of his ‘ fancy’ ego consciousness, when he is stripped of the élite guilty conscience he harbored as a high-flying diplomat (Gerstein, 12-12-18). One is reminded of Anthony Blunt for instance of the Cambridge 5; when this English Public-school boy turned Soviet spy is stripped of his <https://assignbuster.com/how-in-the-first-circle-exemplifies-the-deep-humanity-of-russian-literature-depictions-of-slavophilia-and-spiritual-character-transformations/>

knighthood in the face of these revelations, one sees a reflection of this when Volodin is forcibly stripped of his buttons during processing (S. page 688), as an example of losing that élite privilege which had caused the rash action in the first place. Beyond Volodin's own guilt-born rash action, we see similarities in Sologdin and Nerzhin's self-destructive behavior in the Sharashka. In burning his designs and refusing to cooperate with Colonel Yakonov (S. chapter 79), Sologdin asserts his individual and human autonomy, even if doing so means " setting fire to the ship of hope" (S. page 568). Nerzhin's rashness is expressed around the time of his visit with his wife, expressing indignation and desiring to rashly start " blurting out the truth" (S. page 242), behavior which eventually leads to his effective and self-caused demise when he is selected for transportation (S. page 714). We can summarize these diverse examples as expressions of misplaced resistance towards perceived injustice, knowing full well the consequences of such actions.

Having examined instances of disillusionment, rash decision-making and self-destructive guilty action in Solzhenitsyn's novel, we are able to draw comparisons to other novels in Russian literature that parallel these sentiments. This kind of character " ego-shedding" comes from a good, but misplaced, conscious, one represented by Spiridon's " wolf-killer" comment (S. page 511), a trend we see most notably in War and Peace in Pierre and in Crime and Punishment with Raskolnikov. Pierre avoids his assassination attempt on Napoleon during the Moscow occupation, an action not dissimilar to Volodin's phone call, and undergoes his ego-negating ' de-

aristocratization' (Gerstein 9-26-18) upon meeting the spiritually grounded <https://assignbuster.com/how-in-the-first-circle-exemplifies-the-deep-humanity-of-russian-literature-depictions-of-slavophilia-and-spiritual-character-transformations/>

Platon Karataev while he is a prisoner, a series of events that supports Tolstoy's historical thesis critiquing Hegel's Great Man theory. Although less dependent on attempting or completing a rash action, Dr. Zhivago the poet denies the ego-self by "seeing the light" in Lara's window, thereby acknowledging the external world (Gerstein, fall 2018), much like when Volodin sees "the real Russia" or when he communes with all the "millions of his predecessors" (S. page 691) when he knits up his trousers with a shoe lace. The most directly comparable character to that of Volodin's however must be Raskolnikov in Crime and Punishment. We can interpret Volodin's phone call as his attempt to have his Toulon moment, one where like Raskolnikov he believes he is in a position to overstep (prestupleniye) the law for the greater good. What we must find as well is Volodin's Augustinian moment, akin to both Raskolnikov's symbolically reaching for the gospel after being sent to prison, or indeed like Prince Andrei's 'blue sky' moment of disillusionment from his Toulon aspirations. The 'cleanse' occurs over the course of Chapter 93, when Volodin first realizes his action was "pointless and suicidal" (S. page 701); this self-pity is shed however when he began sewing his buttons back on (S. page 709), illustrating the calming effect of what Pasternak would call 'real' labor, like doing laundry. Finally, remembering his two days spent with Uncle Avenir, Volodin sheds the "great materialist's wisdom" (S. page 711) of Epicurus, realizing the true nature of good and evil, a disillusionment not unlike that of Pierre recognizing the innate hypocrisy of his fellow Free Masons upon meeting Platon Karataev (Gerstein 9-19-18).

We have so far set out ways Solzhenitsyn extols the virtues of Russian literature's deep humanity, and how he draws upon both his own experience and examples from literature in exploring the guilty consciousness and spiritual transformations of many classic Russian characters. However, we must fully elucidate how the humanism evident in the slavophilic depictions relate to these latter points on sacrificing the ego-self, in both *In the First Circle* and in other novels. In other words, what makes these spiritual awakenings a distinctly Russian phenomenon? Just as Raskolnikov reaches for the wisdom of a past experience, in his case by physically reaching for the Gospels that had been introduced to him by Sonya, Volodin connects his ego-shedding to his communing with nature and from Uncle Avenir's wisdom, whose memories become the most important and cheering for him in prison (S. page 710). We see this fusion of Russian deep humanism and the ego-denial in Spiridon as well, as one whose ignorance and self-denial, much like Platon Karataev, never prevented him from becoming one of the "God-bearers" (S. page 505), one of the ideal Russian folk heroes.

It would be useful to develop an answer to these last questions in the context of Russian history, both in the context of the novel's own period and in the periods of the other novels. Solzhenitsyn most explicitly connects this humanism and folk heroism to the trial of Prince Igor in chapter 55. The author contrasts the current regime's tyrannically dialectical materialist ideology with the folk humanism expressed in *The Lay of Igor's Campaign*; by interpreting Igor's adoration for his wife, i. e. his love of family ("Thou art alone, my dove") as having "no thought at all for his motherland" (S. page 393), Solzhenitsyn echoes Uncle Avenir's, and later in prison Volodin's, <https://assignbuster.com/how-in-the-first-circle-exemplifies-the-deep-humanity-of-russian-literature-depictions-of-slavophilia-and-spiritual-character-transformations/>

thoughts on Herzen's limits of patriotism and the dominant ideology in the USSR (S. page 449), once more drawing out the meaning of "the real Russia" that Volodin found when walking towards the peasant village after his train journey with Klara. Uncle's talk about the Russian peasant, who "communes with the soil, with nature" (S. page 447), contrasts with the Marxist idealized proletariat class, which Uncle refers to as the current leading class, showing the absurdity of there even being a leading class in a supposedly classless society. More broadly, we can connect the pastoral scenes from Kondrashov's paintings, or that of Volodin and Klara's walk along the river, to Solzhenitsyn's and indeed many other critiques of trends in Modernization throughout Russian history, toward the supposed "high road of modernity" (S. page 644). Much like Raskolnikov's Nihilism, or Pierre's Decemberist sympathies, we see characters who look west towards Europe for culture and "progress" (a word Rubin loves using), in the vein of Peter the Great, and at the same time we see the countervailing force, shown by Pasternak for instance in Evgraf's Siberia as 'The Future' (Gerstein, fall 2018) and indeed in both Uncles from War and Peace and In the First Circle. On a more meta-historical note, we see Volodin echoing Tolstoy's point about historical forces in the second half of his epilogue, admitting that "It had fallen to him to do it," (S. page 710) implying his phone call was just as inevitable, determined, and devoid of free will as any other historical event, and in this way furthering his ego-denial in a distinctly Russian (i. e. Tolstoyan) historical perspective.

Throughout the span of Russian history covered by our selection of novels, a clear trend emerges that links Slavophilic and volkish sensibilities to a <https://assignbuster.com/how-in-the-first-circle-exemplifies-the-deep-humanity-of-russian-literature-depictions-of-slavophilia-and-spiritual-character-transformations/>

history of almost spiritual character transformations among the suite of protagonists, resulting in the conceptual fusion into what defines Russia's "deep humanity" as described by Max Heyward. Innokenty Volodin and others represent the history of conflict between western modernization and notions of progress and native Russian peasant morality, a conflict that is resolved in each character, such as Pierre, Raskolnikov, or Volodin, through a kind of Christian 'death and resurrection'-style process of ego-denial. While Solzhenitsyn draws upon his own time spent in the Sharashka, it is his inspiration from the Russian literary tradition, history, and religion that truly elevates the novel to classic-status.

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