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THE MORAL AND THE DIVINE: INTERPLAY OF LOVE AND FAITH IN
LEO TOLSTOY'S SHORT STORIES

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the intricate interplay of love and faith within Leo Tolstoy's short works, highlighting his unique approach to these universal themes. Tolstoy, a master of literary craft, employs these concepts not merely as themes, but as fundamental forces driving the human experience. The study focuses on several of his popular and also lesser-known short stories where these elements are pivotal, offering insights into the moral and spiritual dilemmas faced by his characters. Tolstoy's characters often struggle with their faith in a higher power and their capacity for love, set against the backdrop of the harsh realities of 19th-century Russian society. These struggles reflect Tolstoy's own spiritual and ethical convictions, which were significantly influenced by his conversion to a unique form of Christian anarchism later in life. Moreover, the article delves into Tolstoy's narrative techniques—such as his use of irony, inner monologue, and moral ambiguity—that enrich the reader's understanding of love and faith. Tolstoy's portrayal of these themes offers a profound commentary on the eternal human quest for moral integrity and spiritual fulfilment, making his works enduringly relevant in contemporary discourse on faith and morality.

Key words: Love, faith, spiritual narrative, moral philosophy, divinity, Christian anarchism, etc.

Introduction

Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910), one of the towering figures of 19th century literature, remains celebrated not only for his epic novels, such as "War and Peace" and "Anna Karenina", but also for his profound explorations into moral and spiritual philosophy through his short stories. He wrote 629 stories, fables, tales and sketches for children. Martin Green writes that "the novelist himself, in the second half of his life, thought of those two great novels as works to be ashamed of". (166) His devotees after his death regarded him as a moral reformer, opponent of war and injustice and staunch believer in love and humanity and also regard Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King as his true heirs (Green 166). In

his later years, Tolstoy experienced a deep moral and spiritual crisis that led him to embrace a form of Christian anarchism, rejecting organized religion and the state, and advocating for a life of simplicity and faith. This philosophical transformation profoundly influenced his literary output, driving him to weave complex narratives that explore the essence of love, faith, and morality. This paper will delve into an array of Tolstoy's short stories, each selected for their rich portrayal of the themes of love and faith. The stories include:

- "God Sees the Truth but Waits"
- "A Prisoner in the Caucasus"
- "The Bear Hunt"
- "What Men Live by"
- "A Spark Neglected Burns the House"
- "Two Old Men"
- "Where Love is, God is"
- "The Story of Ivan the Fool"
- "Evil Allures, but Good Endures"
- "Little Girls Wiser than Men"
- "Elias"
- "The Three Hermits"
- "The Imp and the Crust"
- "How Much Land Does a Man Need?"
- "A Grain as Big as a Hen's Egg"
- "The Godson"
- "The Repentant Sinner"

These stories are exemplary in demonstrating Tolstoy's grappling with theological and ethical questions, reflecting his own spiritual journey and his quest to understand human nature, divine providence, and the pursuit of a righteous life. Each narrative is not only a reflection of Tolstoy's own ethical and spiritual struggles but also an exploration of the broader human condition, seeking to uncover the profound truths about life, morality, and the divine.

Analysis

The story "**God Sees the Truth, But Waits**" follows Ivan Dmitrich Aksionov, a merchant wrongfully imprisoned for murder. After spending 26 years in Siberian exile, he encounters the true culprit and ultimately forgives him, finding peace before his death. Tolstoy portrays love through Aksionov's forgiveness, and faith through his unwavering belief in divine justice. Despite his suffering, Aksionov's faith leads him to forgive his enemy, reflecting Christ-like love and mercy. The story raises questions about the nature of justice, redemption, and the power of forgiveness. It examines whether divine justice prevails over human injustice and how faith can provide solace amidst suffering.

In "**A Prisoner in the Caucasus**", two Russian soldiers are captured by Caucasian tribesmen. One soldier, Zhilin, plans an escape with the help of a young Tatar girl, Dina, while the other, Kostylin, is more passive. Love is depicted in the compassion and trust between Zhilin and Dina. Faith is reflected in Zhilin's hope and determination to escape, believing in a better future despite his dire circumstances.

This story explores themes of trust, cultural understanding, and the strength derived from hope and faith in humanity's goodness, even in hostile environments.

"The Bear Hunt" talks about a man who goes on a bear hunt and experiences a life-changing encounter with the animal. His initial bravado turns into fear and humility. The protagonist's transformation highlights love for life and nature, and faith in the face of mortal danger. His ordeal instils a deeper appreciation for existence and the natural world. The story delves into human arrogance, the sanctity of life, and the humbling power of nature. It questions humanity's place within the larger ecosystem and the divine force governing life and death.

In **"What Men Live By"**, an angel named Michael is sent to learn three truths about humanity. Disguised as a poor man, he is taken in by a kind shoemaker, Simon. Through his experiences, Michael learns that people live by love. Love is central, depicted through the selfless acts of Simon and his wife. Faith is embodied in their acceptance of Michael and their belief in goodness without expecting anything in return. This story raises profound questions about the essence of life, the importance of love, and the divine presence in everyday kindness and compassion.

"A Spark Neglected Burns the House" narrates a minor dispute between two neighbours which escalates into a destructive feud. Eventually, reconciliation and mutual forgiveness prevent further disaster. Love manifests in the eventual reconciliation, while faith is seen in the belief that peace and understanding can resolve conflicts. The story examines the destructive potential of pride and anger, and the redemptive power of forgiveness and understanding, emphasizing the moral responsibility to maintain harmony.

In **"Two Old Men"**, two old men embark on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Along the way, one helps a starving family and decides to stay and aid them, while the other completes the pilgrimage. The story contrasts different expressions of faith and love. One man's faith is shown in his adherence to religious rituals, while the other's is in his selfless love and aid to those in need. It raises questions about the true nature of piety and what it means to live a righteous life, suggesting that acts of love and compassion are as holy as religious observances.

"Where Love is, God is" tells about Martin, a cobbler who has lost his faith after personal tragedies, rediscovers it through acts of kindness to his neighbours, inspired by his visions of Christ. Tolstoy depicts the transformative power of Christian love. Martin's small acts of kindness reaffirm his faith, showing that divine love is manifested through human actions.: The story explores how faith can be revitalized through love and service to others, suggesting that God is present in acts of love and compassion.

In **"The Story of Ivan the Fool"**, Ivan, a simpleton, inherits a kingdom and, through his innocence and simplicity, transforms it into a peaceful, prosperous land, defying the devil's schemes. Ivan's faith in goodness and love for his people leads to a utopian society. His pure-heartedness contrasts with the cunningness of his brothers and the devil. The story questions conventional notions of wisdom and success, promoting the virtues of simplicity, love, and faith in goodness.

In **"Evil Allures, but Good Endures"**, a thief repeatedly steals from a pious family, who continue to show him kindness. Eventually, their unwavering goodness reforms him. The family's persistent love and faith in the thief's potential for redemption demonstrate the power of goodness over evil. The story explores the transformative power of unconditional love and the moral strength required to persist in goodness despite evil.

In **"Little Girls Wiser than Men"**, two little girls have a minor quarrel but quickly reconcile, setting an example for the adults around them. The children's ability to forgive and forget reflects pure love and an innate faith in human relationships. The story highlights the simplicity and purity of children's morality, suggesting that adults can learn from their example of love and forgiveness.

"Elias" tells about Elias, a former serf, who prospers due to his hard work and faith in God, but he loses everything when he succumbs to pride. He regains his faith and humility and eventually rebuilds his life. Elias's journey illustrates the importance of humility, faith, and perseverance, with love manifesting in his relationships and actions. The story explores themes of pride, humility, faith, and the moral trials of prosperity and adversity.

"The Three Hermits" tells the story of three simple hermits living on an island are visited by a bishop who attempts to teach them formal prayers. The hermits, however, demonstrate a more profound, innate spirituality. The hermits' simple, pure faith and love for God surpass the bishop's formal religious knowledge. The story questions the nature of true faith and spirituality, suggesting that genuine, heartfelt devotion is more important than formal religious practices.

In "The Imp and the Crust", an imp tries to cause mischief by exploiting human greed, but a peasant's generosity and faith thwart his plans. The peasant's love for his fellow man and faith in God's provision counteract the imp's malevolence. The story examines human nature, highlighting the virtues of generosity and faith over greed and selfishness.

In "How Much Land Does a Man Need?", a peasant, Pahom, becomes increasingly greedy for land. His insatiable desire leads to his demise, ultimately illustrating the futility of materialism. Pahom's lack of faith and love for material wealth over spiritual values lead to his downfall. The story questions the moral and spiritual consequences of greed, emphasizing the transient nature of material possessions.

In "A Grain as Big as a Hen's Egg", a giant grain of wheat is discovered, prompting a reflection on the simplicity and health of ancient agricultural practices compared to contemporary ones. The story extols the love for simple, natural living and faith in traditional wisdom. It critiques modern advancements and suggests a return to simpler, more harmonious ways of life that align with nature's bounty.

In "The Godson", a godson embarks on a journey to find truth and wisdom, guided by moral and spiritual lessons from various encounters. His journey is marked by acts of love and faith that lead him to deeper understanding and fulfilment. The story explores the quest for spiritual enlightenment and the role of love and faith in guiding one's path.

"The Repentant Sinner" talks about a sinner, after a lifetime of evil deeds, seeks entry into heaven. Despite his initial rejection, his sincere repentance ultimately gains him divine forgiveness. The story shows the boundless love and mercy of God, rewarding sincere faith and repentance.

Cross-Story Themes:

In Leo Tolstoy's short stories, the interplay of love and faith serves as a central theme, reflecting his deep philosophical and theological inquiries. Despite the diversity of settings and plots, several recurrent themes emerge, providing insights into Tolstoy's evolving ideas about human nature, spirituality, and the moral fabric of society.

- **Transformation Through Love and Faith:** In many of Tolstoy's stories, such as "Where Love is, God is" and "What Men Live by," the transformative power of love and faith is evident. Characters who embrace these virtues often find redemption and a deeper sense of purpose. This theme is also present in "The Repentant Sinner," where the protagonist's late-life repentance and faith offer him a path to salvation. This recurring motif underscores Tolstoy's belief in the capacity of love and faith to redeem and transform individuals, irrespective of their past.
- **Divine Justice vs. Human Justice:** Tolstoy contrasts divine and human notions of justice, particularly in "God Sees the Truth, But Waits." The protagonist suffers under human justice

but ultimately finds peace through divine justice, which aligns more closely with moral truth and spiritual law. This theme recurs in "How Much Land Does a Man Need?" where the protagonist's greed leads to a moral reckoning that reflects a divine judgment on human folly.

- **The Moral and Spiritual Quest:** The quest for moral and spiritual understanding is a significant theme across Tolstoy's stories. "The Three Hermits" and "The Story of Ivan the Fool" portray characters in search of or exemplifying spiritual wisdom that defies conventional understanding. These stories often highlight the superiority of simple, heartfelt faith over intellectual or doctrinal sophistication, suggesting that true spiritual insight is accessible to all, regardless of social or intellectual status.
- **Critique of Materialism and Social Ambition:** Tolstoy frequently criticizes materialism and social ambition, as seen in "A Grain as Big as a Hen's Egg", "The Godson" and "How Much Land Does a Man Need?" He portrays the pursuit of material wealth and social prestige as spiritually empty endeavours that often lead to moral decline. These narratives advocate for a simpler, more spiritually oriented life that prioritizes human relationships and ethical living over material success.
- **Universal Love and Compassion:** The principle of universal love and compassion links many stories, including "Little Girls Wiser than Men" and "What Men Live By?" Tolstoy argues that understanding and compassion should transcend cultural, religious, and social barriers. This universalist approach to love is portrayed as a foundational element for achieving peace and harmony in a fragmented world.
- **The Efficacy of Nonviolence and Pacifism:** Nonviolence and pacifism are themes that resonate in "The Bear Hunt" and "The Imp and the Crust," where Tolstoy explores the power of nonviolent responses and the impact of kindness in overcoming adversity or conflict. These stories reflect his broader advocacy for nonviolent principles and his belief in their efficacy to resolve human conflicts and promote social justice.

Throughout his literary career, Tolstoy's portrayal of love and faith deepened and expanded, moving from a more traditional Christian interpretation in his early works to a radical, almost anarchistic critique of institutional religions and societal norms in his later works. His stories often evolve from simple moral tales to complex narratives that challenge the reader to reconsider their own values and the societal structures around them. This evolution reflects Tolstoy's own spiritual and philosophical journey, marking a shift from a focus on individual moral decisions to a broader critique of social and political systems.

Aylmer Maude (1910), a biographer and researcher of Leo Tolstoy's work, notes that Tolstoy was captivated by legends and fairy tales from a young age. His brother Nicholas, who had a vivid imagination and moral perspective, significantly influenced him. Nicholas was a skilled storyteller who would enthral Tolstoy with tales of legends, spirits, devils, and other entertaining narratives for hours, making them so engaging that they seemed real to the listeners. The study of above stories makes it apparent that Tolstoy was a philosophical humanitarian with didactic and moralistic approach in writing. He wrote many of his legendary tales and stories in order to instruct. He wanted to find a way to reach the masses and to penetrate the hearts of the children. Adir Cohen states that in Tolstoy's stories, the hero's exceptional qualities are essential for attaining profound wisdom. Unlike conventional rewards like wealth, property, or romantic conquests, the hero in Tolstoy's narratives gains the ability to recognize and embody lofty values. Their ultimate reward is the capacity to benefit humanity, enhance the world, and enrich human life. (300)

It is important to note here that Tolstoy's outlook towards life changed substantially with his experiences. His philosophy in his Nobel winning novel *War and Peace* is totally different from what we

see in the stories discussed here. In the middle period of his life, he became averse to violence and war and became a preacher and continued to be so till the end of his life as is evident from these stories, many of which he wrote towards later part of his writing career. He found the education system of his time faulty and strived to work on its reform. He was concerned with growing Western influence on his society. He believed in providing free and grounded atmosphere to kids to develop basic moral sensibilities. Jayme A. Sokolow testifies this as he writes, "For Tolstoy the aim of life was Christian perfection; the means of achievement were a life close to the soil and persistent self-examination; the proper sanction was conscience and Christian morality, and the social goal was the kingdom on earth. Clearly, Tolstoy used ethics and morality as a guide to action and thought. His last years were dedicated to solving the tension between his environment and ethical ideas."

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