
The Sources for the Steeplechase in *Anna Karenina**

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In the introduction to *Besedy o russkoi kul'ture* [Conversations about Russian Culture] Yuri Lotman observes that “in order to understand the meaning of the behaviour of real-life people and of literary heroes from the past, it is imperative to know their culture” (Lotman 9). It is with this in mind that I propose to discuss the real-life circumstances for the steeplechase in *Anna Karenina* and to suggest a fuller reading of one of the most celebrated passages in Russian literature.

The prestigious Emperor’s Cup steeplechase in Part Two of *Anna Karenina* provides the setting for one of the central moments in the novel.¹ Interpretations of the steeplechase have tended to focus on the symbolic links between Frou-Frou and Anna, especially transparent in early drafts of the novel when Anna was called Tanya and Frou-Frou was variously named Tiny (in English) or Tanya (*PSS* 20: 20-33).² A horse race is included in the first extant outlines for the novel (*PSS* 20: 3). The tragic demise of the blameless mare generates, at Vronsky’s expense, considerable sympathy for Anna’s difficult situation. Such a reading, however, ignores a significant feature of the steeplechase. The encounter between Vronsky and Frou-Frou explicitly takes place at the military hippodrome in Krasnoe Selo and is modeled after real-life races, real-life horses, and (most notable in the early drafts) real-life riders.

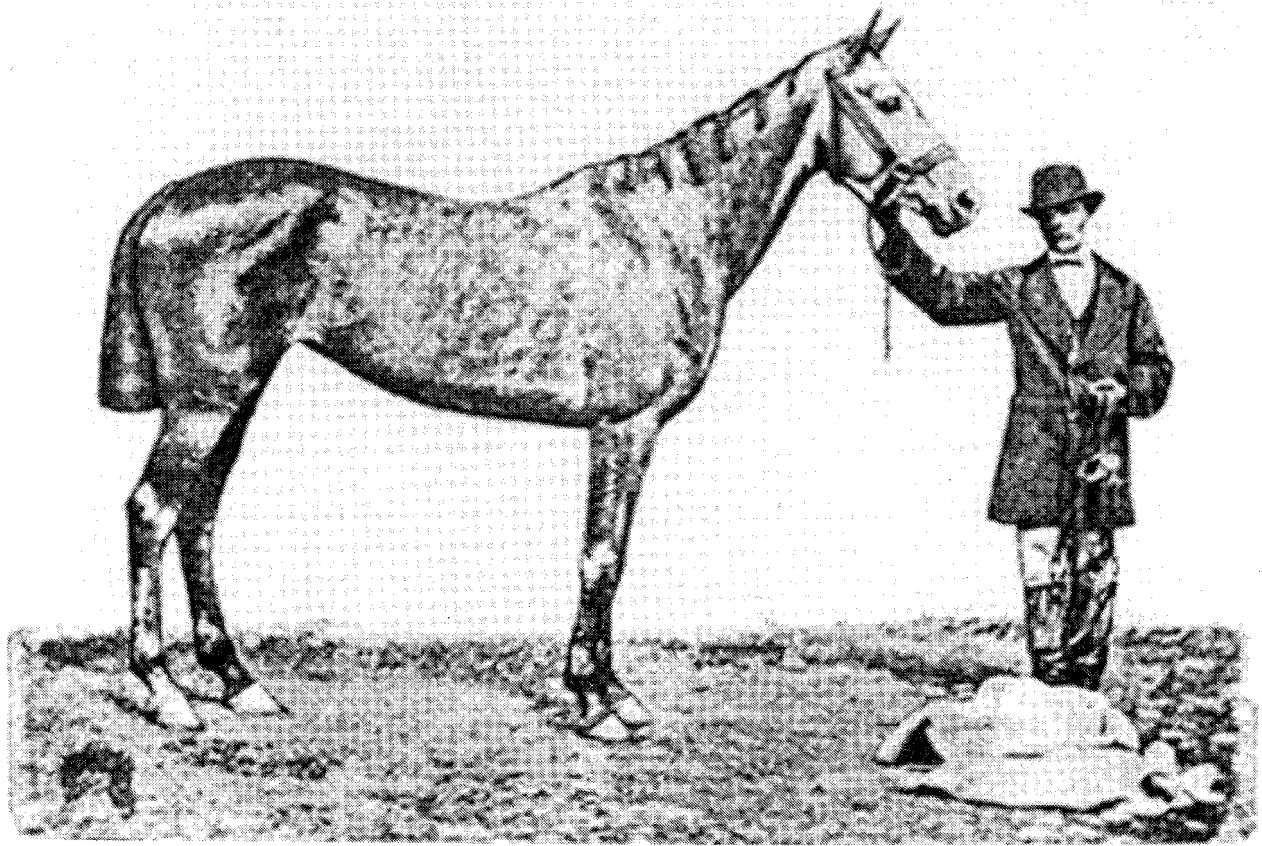
For the modern-day reader, who does not recognize Tolstoy’s topical references, the scene is nonetheless extraordinarily powerful. Yet to appreciate the full impact of Tolstoy’s steeplechase, we must also consider the event as a characterization of Russian culture of the 1870s. The race is staged against the backdrop of “a collec-

tive—a group of people living in unison and connected by a definite social organization” (Lotman 6). In a setting of ritual spectacle reminiscent of the Roman circus, the audience performs the role of the *crème de la crème* of Russian military and civilian society (Vetlovskaja 20). Second, *Anna Karenina*’s first readers undoubtedly recognized—indeed, many of them surely had witnessed—the Emperor’s Cup steeplechase on which Tolstoy’s race is based.

Interestingly, Tolstoy himself did not attend either of the two races that most resemble his steeplechase and from which, I will demonstrate, he made extensive borrowings: the debut of the Emperor’s Cup on 9 July 1872, and its second running, on 29 July 1873. On both occasions Tolstoy was vacationing far to the south, in the Samara province (*PSS* 48: 391). No reference to these races can be found in Tolstoy’s published letters, diaries, or notebooks. Nonetheless, there exists compelling evidence that in 1873 when Tolstoy began working on his steeplechase, he was well informed about the 1872 and, later, the 1873 races.³

From its inaugural running, everything noteworthy about the Emperor’s Cup—race preparations and results; the design of the obstacles on the course; track and weather conditions; the dam, sire, and breeder of each horse; the regimental affiliation of each officer-jockey; who fell, how many times and at what jumps; the number and arrangement of the spectators—was widely reported, notably in the military newspaper *Russkii invalid* [The Russian Disabled Soldier] and the popular sporting journal, *Zhurnal Konnozavodstva* [The Journal of Horse Breeding].⁴ From his neighbour, family friend, and hunting companion, the horse-breeder and racing enthusiast D. D. Obolenskii, Tolstoy received an eye-witness report of the 1872 race.⁵ The clearest evidence that Tolstoy fashioned *his* steeplechase from authentic material comes from the novel itself, however; the remarkable number and range of borrowings point to a systematic effort by the author to shape for artistic ends well-documented events and well-known personalities from Russian upper-class civilian and military life in the early 1870s.

Summer afforded the guards and army posted in Petersburg the opportunity to train in the field and to test horses and cavalry at their outdoor



bivouac in nearby Krasnoe Selo. Beginning in 1845 speed competitions periodically tested active-duty horses according to their military function: separate races for light cavalry and heavy cavalry (an explanation for the heavy-bodied horses who have just completed a two-verst flat race as Vronsky is preparing to ride [*PSS* 18: 203-4]).⁶ Fifteen years later a race track was constructed along with a pavilion for the tsar at the finish line. On either side of the pavilion grandstands were built for distinguished guests and high society (Aminov 35). The day-long competition culminated in a steeplechase in the July glow of "white nights." The Emperor's Cup four-verst (2.5 mile) steeplechase, which com-

bined speed on the flat with jumps made from banks of dirt or straw, hedges, water-filled ditches, dry moats, and a broad shallow stream, was inaugurated in 1872. So the story goes, the tsar himself observed construction of the obstacles and jumped in both directions a ditch which some of his advisors had regarded as too dangerous (Agafonov 3-4).

Entrance criteria varied over time, but during the period in which Tolstoy wrote *Anna Karenina* the evening steeplechase was open to any breed of Russian-bred horse, even if the horse did not serve in the military. In other words, with the exception that only active-duty officers were eligible to compete, race regulations did not even pretend to a military testing of horse and rider.

In keeping with the purely sporting character of this race, officer-jockeys often leased professional race horses from the most esteemed breeding stables in Russia. As the 1872 race demonstrated, the competitive edge clearly belonged to thoroughbreds, many of whom touted their foreign forebears with an English or French name. Extra distinction awaited the winner who had bred and/or owned the horse he rode. (Recall that Vronsky first signs up for the race and only then buys “an English pure-blood mare” [PSS 18: 184].)

Honour likewise accrued to the regiments of the winning riders and to the mostly civilian, private breeders of the winning horses. In the 1872 race, for example, three of the four riders representing the most elite officer regiment, His Majesty’s Horse Guard [*Kavalerghardskii Ego Velichestva polk*], chose to ride horses bred by Bologovskii, one of the most successful thoroughbred breeders of the day; his horses earned second and third place. (Izabella, from the Merder stud farm, won the race in 1872, which probably explains why Merder-bred horses dominated the entrants in the 1873 race.) Although (or perhaps because) the English pure-blood horse was considered a western European horse, thoroughbred breeding was regarded as an especially aristocratic pastime. By the 1860s the “western” thoroughbred had displaced in prestige, if not in numbers or popularity, the uniquely Russian (“Slavophile”) national breed, the Orlov Trotter. As a consequence, the Emperor’s Cup steeplechase became a gala testing ground for socially prominent and urbane breeders and owners of thoroughbreds. (Interestingly, in Part Seven of the novel, Vronsky, now a civilian, does eventually win an Emperor’s Cup race, but in harness racing. In the temporary role of gentleman farmer and modestly pleased owner of the victorious Orlov Trotter, Atlasnyi, Vronsky has retreated from personal participation in racing to detached observer at best.⁷) In short, the Emperor’s Cup steeplechase arguably offered its winners the greatest honour among gentlemen’s (and therefore amateur) horse races in all of Russia. While the prize for first place totaled 3,500 rubles, the more coveted

award, especially for the mostly wealthy and titled officers who competed, was the prestige accorded the winning rider, the regiment with the most winners, and the winning breeder.

As visual spectacle, what most distinguished the Emperor’s Cup from professional races with paid jockeys or amateur races hosted by local sports clubs was the festive military atmosphere (including military costume for the riders and military tack for the horses). The steeplechase found an eager audience among the vacation colony at nearby Tsarskoe Selo, where wealthy Petersburg residents trebled the population in summer. The July day of racing became a highlight of the summer season, a gathering of socially prominent faces, seeing and being seen, cheering on their officer friends and enjoying the fresh air of the fashionable country-side. The celebratory mood was intensified by the important new trophy for the steeplechase, the Emperor’s Cup, first awarded in 1872.⁸ The cup’s patron, Tsar Alexander II (who sponsored cups in several types of equine sport), greeted each of the contestants before the race and then enthusiastically cheered them on. He personally bestowed the prizes upon the winners.

Perhaps the cholera outbreak in Petersburg kept attendance in check for the 1872 running, or it may be that the race’s thrilling reputation spread during the intervening year, but in 1873, attendance far exceeded the hippodrome’s seating capacity. For the second running of the Emperor’s Cup (and for several years after) special trains were put in service to carry the crowds from Petersburg to Krasnoe Selo. Temporary seating, erected a few days before the steeplechase, proved inadequate for the throngs of people: “the grandstands were filled to overflowing” (*RI* 1872, No. 170: 2). Rain, both before the 1872 race and during the 1873 race, seemed not to deter the spectators. Rain, of course, is also featured in Tolstoy’s steeplechase.

The Emperor’s Cup steeplechase at Krasnoe Selo resembles in several ways the competition described in *Anna Karenina*; these suggest Tolstoy’s commitment to portray with clinical precision a prominent ritual from high society culture

that populates the Vronsky-Anna parts of the novel. Not only does Tolstoy incorporate a well-documented event into his novel, but he also makes use of well-known race-course personalities.

Commentators have noted that early drafts of the steeplechase include the names of two participants in the 1872 Emperor's Cup race: Aide-de-camp Lt. A. D. Miliutin, the first-prize winner who metamorphosed in the novel into Makhotin riding Gladiator; and Cornet Prince D. B. Golitsyn, whose name made its way into the novel as Gal'tsyn, "one of Vronsky's dangerous opponents and a friend" (*PSS* 18: 205). Prince Golitsyn's fall, less spectacular than its reputation *after* the publication of the novel, mutated into the centrepiece for Tolstoy's race (see below) (*PSS* 20: 641). Two other real-life race participants, not found in the early drafts, but present in the final novel, have escaped critical notice: from a popular and well-publicized racing rivalry Tolstoy has borrowed the names and identities of two famous professional race horses, Diana and Gladiator. They competed against each other on several occasions in 1873 (but rarely in 1872) and often finished 1-2, as they would in the second running of the Emperor's Cup (*ZhK*, 1873, No. 10: 47-67). In a full reading of Tolstoy's race, the symbolic associations of the names Diana (goddess of childbirth and protectress of the young, mistress of wild things, alternately an alluring virgin or a deadly huntress) and Gladiator (a professional warrior, a captured slave trained to engage in mortal combat as spectator sport in the Roman arena) cannot be discounted. Nor can the calculation with which Tolstoy chose to include from the 1873 race two of the leading equine figures in the sporting world of the mid-1870s.

In the 1873 race the dark bay mare Diana (who had also run in the 1872 Emperor's Cup) and Gladiator, recently purchased and ridden by newly promoted Lt. Prince Golitsyn (also racing for the second year in a row) competed in a field which included the mares Undine, Actress, Coquette, Sultaness, and Parisienne. In the company of these erotically charged feminine names, it might be appropriate to recall that although no horse named Frou-Frou competed in the Em-

peror's Cup, a real-life Frou-Frou nonetheless figures in Tolstoy's steeplechase. A mare named Frou-Frou, owned by D. D. Obolenskii and subsequently for a short time by Tolstoy, was withdrawn from the "Tsarskoe Selo Prize" contested at the Moscow hippodrome on 20 July 1872; had she run she would have competed against Gladiator (*ZhK*, 1872, No. 10: 72-73). The following month, she was withdrawn from a racing series at Tsarskoe Selo in which both Gladiator and Diana competed (*ZhK*, 1872, No. 11: 94-115).⁹

Surely the most immediate and resonant connection between the Emperor's Cup steeplechase as historical fact and as raw material for Tolstoy's art relates to the risk inherent in the event. One of the goals of the race, according to the official announcement, was to encourage in officers "mettle, cleverness and horsemanship" ["likhost', lovkost' i iskusstvo"] (Agafonov 26). More concretely, the steeplechase quickly earned a reputation as one of the most dangerous competitions held at Krasnoe Selo. The 1872 race attracted the largest number of entrants in the history of the Emperor's Cup (Agafonov 46); of the 27 who started, only 15 horses and riders completed the course. There were 18 falls during the race, with one rider falling off and remounting five times!

Stationed at each obstacle were "commanders of horse guard regiments for observation, as well as doctors with the requisite number of officers of lower rank and field hospital carriages for giving aid in case of need" (*ZhK*, 1872, No. 9: 77). Tolstoy's race was fully as dangerous as the real one: Prince Kuzovlev, riding Diana, is so terrified that he must be led to the starting line. To convey Kuzovlev's fears Tolstoy borrows the contingent of observers from the real Emperor's Cup: "They [fellow competitors] knew he was afraid of everything, he was even afraid of riding an active-duty horse; but now, just because it was terrifying, because people were breaking their necks and because at each obstacle there was a doctor in attendance, a field hospital wagon with a red cross sewn onto it, and a nurse, he had resolved to ride" (*PSS* 18: 206).

In the 1872 race a riderless horse fell into a water-filled ditch at the fourth fence, which caused four other horses and riders to collide and



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fall as well, including Ensign Cheliaev who “was seriously injured and carried unconscious from the race course” (*ZhK*, 1872, No. 9: 83). In the single fatal accident, at the tenth and penultimate jump and comfortably in the lead (as he had been since the fifth fence), Cornet Prince S. P. Golitsyn “fell with his stallion Singel’ton, who hurt his back during the jump” and obviously suffered internal damage (Agafonov 44). Evidently able to rise since he was taken back to his stall, Singel’ton died on the following day from his injuries. As innumerable commentators have recognized, Sin-

gel’ton’s accident has become immortalized in the novel’s dramatic account of Frou-Frou’s fall. Curiously, a much more elaborately detailed description of the accident is offered in early drafts of the novel. The noted Americanist Dmitrii Urnov, himself an enthusiastic horse fan, is convinced that Obolenskii either stood at the tenth fence or spoke with someone who had been there and subsequently described to Tolstoy particulars of the fall (Urnov 1978: 192-93). An early draft (in which Miliutin and Golitsyn are explicitly named, but Vronsky is still called Balashev and

Frou-Frou is still Tanya/Tiny) reads:

She [the horse] rose up, but just a bit early. So that to get over the ditch she had to jump a distance of not two, but three arshins [seven feet], but that didn't bother her and she knew that and so did he. They thought only about galloping onward. Suddenly Balashev felt that at the instant when he had completed the jump the horse's hind quarters failed to support him, and had sunk down awkwardly (her hind foot had landed on the edge of the bank and, cutting deeply into the turf, sank down). But it was just for an instant. Almost as if she were angry at that distraction and trying to ignore it, the horse shifted all of her power onto the other hind foot and, confident of the resilience of her left hind, dashed on, leaning forward with her whole chest. But whether her foot had turned sideways or whether the horse had been too confident of the foot's strength, or whether the foot had landed badly, the foot did not bear up, her front end rose up, the hind end gave way and horse and rider collapsed backward onto the very bank of the ditch. . . . Balashev clutched at his hair. "AA!" he said and in a rage kicked at his horse's side with his heel. (*PSS* 20: 38)

I have argued that the most persuasive testimony that Tolstoy incorporated real-life material into *Anna Karenina* comes from the novel itself. With respect to the draft passage quoted above, the conclusion seems compelling that Tolstoy's unrelentingly graphic account of the movements of Tanya/Tiny's hind feet has its source in the 1872 Emperor's Cup. In any case the transformation of Singel'ton's fall by way of Tanya/Tiny's fall to Frou-Frou's fall reveals stunning transformations between the historically-grounded fall (raw material) and its final artistic representation in the novel.

By all accounts, Golitsyn was not culpable in Singel'ton's fall. Balashev, despite his ungentlemanly kick at the horse, is likewise not at fault in his riding; horse and rider share their partnership, she enjoys independence of action (" . . . she knew that and so did he"). Vronsky, by contrast, insists on being in control; he causes the accident by his overwhelming desire not simply to win (which he would have), but to win by a large margin.

But whatever the degree of culpability we

might attribute to Vronsky, it is essential to recognize that the novel's first readers surely held a more sympathetic view of Vronsky than we do today. For many of the novel's first readers the steeplechase must have induced a jolt of familiarity, immediacy, and personal connection. They would have recognized and sympathized with the officers of Vronsky's regiment with their elaborate code of honour; the reckless courage required by the race, an ersatz substitute for real war; and the thrilled and thrilling attention of the spectators. For these early readers, Vronsky would have seemed a model of his culture. To claim, as modern-day readers have, that Vronsky is an insensitive brute to his horse smacks too loudly of late-twentieth-century attitudes. The whole episode of the steeplechase, infused as it is with real-life events and characters, stands as an intermediary between past and present. It is itself a cultural artefact which, in Lotman's sense, both preserves raw material of the past and gives that material permanence by incorporating it and transforming it into high art.

Notes

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1. The secondary sources that have most influenced my reading of the steeplechase include Almazov, Bayley, Blackmur, Eikhenbaum, Ivanov, Merejkowski, Muchnic, Obolenskii, Stewart, Urnov, and Vetlovskaiia.

2. All references to *Anna Karenina* are from the Jubilee edition and are cited in the text by volume and page.

3. Despite all evidence to the contrary, some modern-day writers have placed Tolstoy at the race (Ivanov, Urnov, Begunova). Begunova (189) offers the most enterprising and far-fetched account of the 1872 race: "L. Tolstoy saw this first race and used an actual event [from the Emperor's Cup] for the centrepiece of the episode with Vronsky. Prince Golitsyn, brilliantly riding most of the race, fell with his horse at the last [*sic*] jump and was deprived of his well deserved award. *His horse did not receive any injury. The story about the broken back is an invention by the great writer. . .*" (italics mine). Aside from Begunova's minor error in mislocating the site of the fall, she moves into pure fantasy in claiming that the horse was not injured. This kind of error suggests the difficulty of reconstructing the past.

4. Hereafter cited in the text as *RI* and *ZhK*. From *RI* see especially 1872, Nos. 151, 152, 162; 1873, Nos. 166, 168, 170. From *ZhK* see especially 1872, No. 9: 75-84; 1973 No. 9: 89-96. Descriptions of the Emperor's Cup for the years 1872-1897 originally published in *RI* (and on which all other accounts are based) were reprinted with extensive background and commentary by K. Agafonov in 1897. One caveat: there exist small but annoying discrepancies between the 1897 version and the original sources.

5. Obolenskii (who has been suggested as a model for Stiva Oblonskii [*PSS* 20: 640]) probably exaggerates his own authority concerning Tolstoy's interactions with horses, but his own presence at the 1872 races has been confirmed by Dmitrii Urnov. He related to me that through conversations with old-time horsemen he has verified to his satisfaction not only Obolenskii's presence at the 1872 races, but also the latter's knowledge of the details of the fall at the tenth fence.

6. See, for example, accounts of summer racing for officers at Krasnoe Selo in *ZhK*, 1859, No. 9: 119, and No. 10: 133; 1860, No. 7: 36.

7. By almost uncanny coincidence, the fictional Atlasnyi has both a real-life counterpart and a personal connection to Tolstoy. The name Atlasnyi links Vronsky's horse back to Staryi Atlasnyi, son of Muzhik I, otherwise known as Kholstomer, whom Tolstoy made famous in his story of that name. In 1837, Tolstoy's older brother Sergei bought and used at stud for four

years Atlasnyi Vtoroi, great grandson of Muzhik I; it is probably Sergei's Orlov Trotter who gave his name to the Atlasnyi in *Anna Karenina* (Graevskii 12).

8. The official name of the cup was Krasnosel'skaia ofiterskaia skachka, na prizy, Vsemilostiveishe pozhalovannye IKH IMPERATORSKIMI VELICHESTVAMI GOSUDAREM IMPERATOROM, GOSUDARYNEIU IMPERATRITSEIU i chlenami IMPERATORSKOI Familii.

9. The curious history of Frou-Frou goes beyond the scope of this article; suffice it to say that Tolstoy had the opportunity to get to know her personally. Shortly after the end of Frou-Frou's brief career as a literal non-starter, Tolstoy purchased her from Obolenskii and briefly hunted with her, probably in the fall of 1872 or 1873. Horse and rider did not get on well; Tolstoy surrendered the mare to his brother Sergei, who had greater success with her. The appearance of Frou-Frou in *Anna Karenina* may have registered as a private joke among those few who knew the horse, but that coincidence was surely irrelevant to Tolstoy's choice of name. As several critics have pointed out, Frou-Frou's name traces back to the heroine of the popular domestic tragedy *Froufrou*, which premiered in Paris in October 1869 and found its way to the French Theatre in Petersburg in the same theatrical season (Ivanova 31). Subsequently, in two different Russian translations, both entitled *A Light Breeze [Veterok]*, it was performed in Moscow at the Mal'yi Theatre on numerous occasions between 1870 and 1874 (Kholodov 427). The heroine Froufrou, a flighty, spoiled, cheerful creature elegantly attired in long, rustling dresses, bears little resemblance to Anna, except that her adulterous affair also leads to her death. Thus, while Obolenskii's mare brought the name Frou-Frou to Tolstoy's attention, the name's symbolic charge derives from the play (Ivanova, Martin). To complicate matters, Obolenskii's Frou-Frou officially began her life registered as Lea, but the official studbook records two thoroughbred fillies named Frou-Frou, born 1874 and 1883 respectively (Zavod'skaia 1868, 1875, 1882, 1887). The 1883 Frou-Frou, born eight years after Part Two of *Anna Karenina* had been published and two years after Sara Bernhardt's performance of Froufrou in a scandal-filled tour of Russia, had a richer field of topical and evocative associations than did her predecessors (Senelick, Skinner 208-212). The Frou-Frou connections carry us far beyond the Emperor's Cup (Kirsanova 338-341), but bring additional specific real-life cultural associations to the novel.

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