



Dr Zhivago

Boris Pasternak



About the author

Born in Moscow in 1890, Boris Pasternak was brought up in a cultured Jewish household. He at first intended to be a musician, before deciding to study philosophy at Moscow University. During the First World War he worked in a chemical factory, and after the Revolution he worked for the Soviet commissariat of education. His first volume of poetry was published in 1913; with the publication of his third volume, *My Sister, Life*, in 1922, he was recognised as a major new lyrical voice. However, Pasternak's work was regarded as going against the Communist Party line, and from 1933 to 1943 he was unable to publish anything, and survived by translating great European writers. Pasternak's lifework was *Dr Zhivago*, which he submitted to a leading Moscow periodical in 1956. It was rejected as being politically unsound. It was published in Italy in 1957 and Pasternak was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature a year later. However, this led to persecution in his own country, and he was unable to accept the award. He died in 1960, aged seventy, suffering from cancer and heart trouble. It was not until 1987 that *Dr Zhivago* was finally published in Russia, and the recognition that was Pasternak's due was finally granted him.

Summary

Dr Zhivago tells the story of five young people as they live through the Russian Revolution, when the Russian monarchy is overthrown and the world's first Communist state is established. There is Yuri Zhivago, brilliant and idealistic doctor, poet and writer; Tonya, who is a lawyer and Yuri's wife; Lara, a nurse; her soldier husband, Pasha, who is an inspired leader of men; and Misha,

philosopher and friend to Yuri. Yuri Zhivago is the true hero of this epic story – we see the turbulence and danger of the Revolution and the First World War through his compassionate eyes. Yuri, while married to Tonya, falls deeply in love with Lara, a woman of mystery and magnetism. Both Yuri and Lara love their families. But their love for one another seems destined. They meet, are parted by the ravages of war, meet again and are parted once more. Although the end of the story may seem tragic, it is not, for their love transcends death itself.

Chapter 1: It is 1901. Yuri Zhivago is a young boy standing at his mother's funeral. Having been abandoned by his father long before, he is taken up by Uncle Kolya, a citizen concerned with the political ideas of the time.

Chapter 2: Yuri's father is on a train talking to Mr Gordon, a lawyer about his financial troubles. He jumps off and kills himself. Uncle Kolya sends Yuri to live in Moscow with the rich Gromekos.

Chapter 3: Lara Guishar's mother owns a struggling shop and is under the influence of the evil Komarovsky, a friend of her late husband's. He introduces her to a world of luxury and she belongs to him. Her best friend Pasha is secretly in love with her. The situation in Moscow worsens.

Chapter 4: During one of the Gromekos' musical parties, a violinist is called back home to see a dying friend: Lara's mother has tried to kill herself. Yuri and her friend Misha see Lara and Komarovsky. Misha recognises him as the man who was on the train with Yuri's father.

Chapter 5: Lara shoots Komarovsky at a party but misses. He realises she has the power to hurt him but does not want to risk his reputation by being linked to her. He decides to find her a place to live but he will stay away from her. Yuri recognises Lara. Tonya is devastated by her mother's death.

Chapter 6: Yuri marries Tonya. He works as a doctor in a hospital in Moscow. They have a son. Lara marries Pasha and they move out of Moscow to become teachers. They have a daughter. Their relationship is complicated, and so he joins the army.

Chapter 7: Yuri is working at one of the army's hospitals. When Misha visits, they discuss the horrors of the new regime and the war. They make plans to leave together but the Germans attack and Yuri is seriously wounded.



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Chapter 8: Lara learns about Pasha's death. Yury and Lara become friends. After three years, he manages to get back to his wife and son in Moscow, where the 1917 Revolution has started, and a difficult winter is coming. Yury helps a man who was robbed and who later protects him and his family.

Chapter 9: On a long trip by train to the family estate in Varykino through destroyed villages, Yury is captured and released by Commissar Strelnikov, who is really Pasha. On arrival, they find the former employees in the house but are allowed some rooms. The son is an important Bolshevik leader named Liberius.

Chapter 10: Yury begins writing and meets Lara on his frequent trips to the library in Yuryatin. He is determined to stop seeing her and tell Tonya the truth. He is kidnapped by Liberius's men.

Chapter 11: After two years with the Reds, Yury escapes through Siberia. Ill and exhausted, he gets to Lara's house. She looks after him. Yury gets a letter from Tonya: she has baby girl and is leaving Russia. Lara leaves with Komarovsky to avoid danger. Strelnikov shoots himself and Yury returns to Moscow.

Chapter 12: Yury abandons medicine and writes in solitude until a former servant helps him and his daughter, Marina, becomes Yury's new love.

Chapter 13: Marina and Yury have two children. Misha tells Yury to contact Tonya, who is in Paris, so that he can marry Marina, to comply with the new rules and to resume work. His half brother Yevgraf helps him rebuild his life away from his family. On his way to work at the hospital, Yury dies of a heart attack. Lara arrives to say goodbye to Yury and search for their daughter who was raised by strangers in Moscow. She is never seen again.

Chapter 14: Yevgraf finds Tanya, the lost child. Lara gave her up because Komarovsky did not want children around. Misha becomes an officer during the Second World War and enjoys reading Yury's books.

The original text

Published in 1957, the story is widely considered one of the finest novels of the twentieth century. It not only gives one of the best descriptions of the early days of the Russian Revolution, it is also one of the world's greatest

love stories. The author, Boris Pasternak, was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1958. By the end of that year, it had been translated into eighteen languages. The film *Doctor Zhivago* (1965) was also hugely successful.

Background and themes

Dr Zhivago is in the tradition of the great Russian novels of the nineteenth century. It has the epic sweep of a novel such as *War and Peace*, moving through space and time with the agility and assurance of a master novelist. The novel starts in Moscow in 1901, and ends, in Moscow again, in 1943. Of the five main characters, some are born to wealth, others are poor. The vicissitudes of war and revolution mean that each of the five characters comes to learn that there is no security. To read *Dr Zhivago* is like taking a ride on a roller coaster: if a character at last seems to have found a haven in which to live peacefully with his family, fate then intervenes, in the shape of war, poverty, or some such evil, and chaos ensues once more. Thus, Pasternak conveys to the reader a real sense of what it was like to live at the time of the Russian Revolution, a sense of the utter insecurity of those who lived through it, even if they may have agreed with its principles.

Following another tradition of the nineteenth century Russian novel, Pasternak makes his hero, *Dr Zhivago*, a good and idealistic man, committed to doing whatever he can to help his people. Besides being a doctor, Zhivago is also a poet and a writer, and one has the sense that Pasternak put a lot of himself, his own hopes and ideas, into this good-hearted doctor. Again, as is typical in a Russian novel, Zhivago engages in philosophical and political discussions with his friends, so that the reader is able to appreciate the kinds of ideas that were prevalent among intellectuals at that time. It is against this background that we must view Yury Zhivago's love for Lara. Pasternak brilliantly portrays for us a loving family man utterly torn in two – and eventually destroyed – by his love for another woman. Pasternak was a great poet, and it is in the love story of Yury and Lara that his lyricism shines most brightly. It is here that his novel parts company with the Russian novelists of the previous century, for *Dr Zhivago* has a lyrical and poetic energy of its own. Readers will finish *Dr Zhivago* feeling saddened but greatly enriched, with a deeper understanding of life.



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Discussion activities

Before reading

- Pair work:** Put students in pairs. Ask them to say what they know about the Russian Revolution that brought Communism into the world. Then elicit information from students, making notes on the board. Then students read the Historical Notes on page vi. Ask them this question:
Why are these dates important in the Russian Revolution?
(a) 1905
(b) February 1917
(c) July 1917
(d) October 1917
- Discuss:** Ask students to read the Introduction and the Historical Notes on page vi. Then answer these questions about these sentences in the Introduction.
(a) '... the lives of four young people are interrupted by the extraordinary events of the Russians Revolution.'
Why were these events so extraordinary?
(b) 'Each of the four ... faces the endless problems caused by the Revolution.' What kind of problems do you think the Revolution caused them or might cause them?

Chapters 1–3

While reading

- Discuss:** (after reading Chapter 1) Yury was brought up by Uncle Kolya, who was more than a father figure to him. Ask students to discuss possible answers to this question: How do you think his Uncle might influence his future life?
- Pair work:** (page 2) Ask students in pairs to explain the relationship between Yury and his father with the information available so far.
- Guess:** (page 3) We learn that Yury's father has committed suicide. Ask students to discuss what kind of problems could have made him make such a tragic decision based on the brief information readers have.
- Role play:** (page 3) Soon after they returned from the trip to Duplyanka, Uncle Kolya sent Yury to Moscow to live with some distant relatives, the Gromekos. Ask students in pairs to role play the conversation between Yury and his Uncle when he breaks the news to the boy.

After reading

- Group work:** Divide the class into groups of three. Assign a character to each: Yury, Lara and Pasha. Ask each group to gather information about their character's family background, their physical description, personality, dreams and hopes, and friends. Then form new groups of three students,

each coming from a different original group and with information about a different character. In the new group, they compare the life of the three people in the story so far. Then they share their views.

Chapters 4–5

Before reading

- Guess:** The main characters in the story have been introduced. Ask students to guess what will happen between them.

While reading

- Role play:** (page 12) Lara's brother, Rodya, is in serious trouble: he must pay a gambling debt. Lara, upset and embarrassed, asks Nadya's father for help. Ask students to role play this conversation in pairs.
- Group work:** (page 13) On her deathbed, Anna tells Yury and Tonya to get married. Divide students into two groups and ask them to think of arguments in favour and against Anna's wish. You can use these questions to guide them:
Was this the right thing to do?
Should she impose such a heavy burden on these young people? Or was she aware of the feelings for each other that they were not aware of themselves?
What would happen if Yury or Tonya did not want to get married?
- Role play:** (page 14) Ask students to imagine they are guests at the Sventitskys' Christmas party. What are they wearing? What is the atmosphere like at the party? What is the buffet like? Ask students to act out a conversation between them in pairs or small groups.
- Pair work:** (page 14) Yury sees Lara for the second time at the party. Ask students to compare this time with the previous one, at her place. How does Yury feel about her now?

After reading

- Group work:** Put students in groups of four. Each student must write a short paragraph describing a character's thoughts at a certain point in the story so far. They read their paragraph aloud and the rest of the group say who the character is and what the situation is.

Chapters 6–8

Before reading

- Discuss:** Ask students how much they know about the First World War. How long did it last? Who did Russia fight against? How did the war end for Russia?

While reading

- Pair work:** (page 17) Ask students in pairs to compare the marriage of Yury and Tonya to that of Pasha and Lara. Then form new pairs to see whether they have considered the same ideas.



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- 16 Discuss:** (page 24) Yury asks Lara: 'Why can't an adult man talk to an adult woman without everyone thinking they are more than friends?' Ask students to discuss whether that is still true in their communities and whether friendship between a man and a woman is possible / desirable / more complicated than friendship with people of the same sex.
- 17 Group work:** (page 30) Ask students to work in small groups. Ask them to explain the analogy in the novel: '... there was something similar between the political events and the weather.' Tell students that the weather mirroring events is a frequent cinematographic technique: rain signals a break-up in the flow of events and the course of the story is altered. On the contrary, a sunny day is a positive sign. Can this also happen in real life?
- 18 Discuss:** (page 32) Yury says 'This is a great idea but I doubt that it can work.' What do you think are Yury's concerns about the future? Then read until the end of the chapter and decide if their suppositions were right.

After reading

- 19 Role play:** Ask student to work in pairs and imagine it is the winter of 1917–18. Ask them to act a conversation between Yury and Tonya as they talk about the political situation, their problems and who can help them.
- 20 Pair work:** Put students in pairs. Ask them to write a description of how Yury changes during his illness and what he looks like after he recovers. Then ask them to join up with another pair and read each other their descriptions. From the two descriptions they write another fuller description.

Chapters 9–10

Before reading

- 21 Guess:** Following Yury's brother Yevgraf's advice, the Zhivagos go to Varykino, near Yuryatin. Ask students to discuss the following: What sort of life will they have there? What will Yury do? Will they be able to leave their problems behind?

While reading

- 22 Role play:** (page 34) Yury does not want to leave Moscow to settle in the estate of Tonya's grandfather, but in the end, his wife and father in law persuade him. First ask students to pool ideas about which arguments Tonya and her father might have used to persuade Yury to leave. Then, ask students in small groups to act out the conversation between the three.
- 23 Discuss:** (page 37) Tonya's father says that, '... the revolution is not what they expected, but no political system can stay pure.' Ask students to discuss the truth in this statement. Do they agree? Why/why not?

- 24 Group work:** (page 40) We learn about the cruel leader of the Red Army: Strelnikov. Ask students in groups to make a list of the signs of violence and cruelty that Zhivago finds on his journey by train. Then we learn that he is Pasha. Ask student in the same groups to fill in the information about his life from the moment he left Lara and Katya, to the moment Zhivago meets him.
- 25 Pair work:** (page 44) Ask students to work in pairs and discuss this statement: Yury is unfaithful to his wife with Lara. How do you feel about this? Explain why. Was this his only choice? Had he been made to marry a woman he did not love? If they had not being in the middle of a war, would this have happened?

After reading

- 26 Group work:** Ask students to write down the two most important feelings that the book causes in them. Then they find two other people who share the same feelings. Together, they explain to the rest of the class what it is about the book that makes them feel like this.
- 27 Pair work:** Ask students in pairs to answer this question: What have you learnt from reading *Dr Zhivago* so far? Consider not only the characters and the story but the political situation as well.

Chapter 11

Before reading

- 28 Discuss:** Ask students: Are you glad to be reading the book? Explain why/why not.

While reading

- 29 Guess:** (page 53) Ask students to guess what Yury will decide to do after reading Tonya's letter. How do you think he feels?
- 30 Discuss:** (page 57) Ask students to discuss the following: Would you agree that Komarovsky succeeds in ruining Lara's life again? If so, how does he do this?
- 31 Group work:** (page 59) Get students to work in groups and answer the following: Why do you think Yury refuses to go away with Komarovsky and Lara? Can you understand it? How does he trick Lara? Do you think he is right to do so? Is it a strong or a weak thing to do, do you think?
- 32 Role play:** (page 60) Yury persuades Lara to leave with Komarovsky but without him. Ask students to role play the conversation between Yury and Lara.
- 33 Discuss:** (page 62) Ask students to consider the character of Pasha. He was a learned man who could have played a very positive role in the New Russia. Why do you think Pasha kills himself? Would you describe this as a strong or a weak thing to do? Give reasons for your opinion.



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After reading

- 34 Pair work:** In pairs, students discuss to what extent they agree with these statements. Then have a whole class discussion about them.
- In this chapter, *Dr Zhivago* becomes a tragic story.
 - The tragic events in the lives of Yury, Lara and Pasha are caused by the Revolution, not by individuals.

Chapters 12–14

Before reading

- 35 Guess:** Lara is gone and Tanya has left Moscow. Ask students to speculate about the following: What kind of life will Yury find in Moscow? Will he be able to get his job at the hospital back?

While reading

- 36 Group work:** (page 65) Put students into groups of three. One student plays Yury, one student plays Misha and one student plays Yevgraf. Misha and Yevgraf talk to Yury, encourage him to sort things out with Tonya, look after himself and his new family, write and find a job. They act out the conversation.
- 37 Discuss:** (page 65) We read that Yury needs to leave his new family to rebuild his life. And that involves writing. Ask students to discuss the following: Why does Yury find it so hard to obey the new rules or commit to a family? Which makes him happier: Medicine or writing? Why?
- 38 Group work:** (page 67) Ask students in small groups to discuss the following questions:
What do you learn about Lara and her daughter in these chapters?
What is your reaction to this information?
What do you think will become of Tanya now? Then they share their ideas with the rest.

After reading

- 39 Role play:** Ask students to imagine the following situation: Tonya returns to Moscow when the war is over. She meets Yevgraf, who briefs her with the latest news: Yury's death, his new family, including Tanya. Ask students in pairs to act out the conversation between Tony and Yevgraf.

- 40 Discuss:** Ask students to discuss the following:
 Do you think that *Dr Zhivago* ends on a note of hope or a note of despair? Give reasons for your opinion.

Extra activities

- 41 Group work:** Ask students in small groups to draw Yury's family tree by the end of the novel. How do his children reflect the different stages in his life? Then they display their drawing and share their ideas with the rest.
- 42 Discuss:** Ask students to discuss the following:
 Which do you think have the most importance in *Dr Zhivago*: the love stories or the political events? Give reasons for your opinion. Then encourage them to comment on any story – either in a novel or in a film – that is set amid a historical event. How does *Dr Zhivago* compare to such a story?
- 43 Pair work:** Ask students to discuss the following in pairs of small groups. Which of these adjectives do you think describes Yury Zhivago best? (If necessary, use your dictionary to help you.) Account for your choice with examples from the story.
- idealistic
 - stubborn
 - committed
 - selfish
 - weak
- 44 Discuss:** Tell students that the 1965 production of *Doctor Zhivago*, starring Omar Sharif, Geraldine Chaplin and Julie Christie, was very successful and won several awards. Then ask them to consider what the greatest challenge must have been when turning this novel into a film.

Vocabulary activities

For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.