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IMT 4113 - History of Translation

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Constance Garnett: The Artisan of Translation — Crafting the Anglo-Russian Literary Bridge

“Childhood is played out in a foreign language and our memory of it is a Constance Garnett translation.”

Rabih Alameddine

Constance Garnett emerged as a pivotal figure in the realm of translation, particularly renowned for introducing Russian literature to the English-speaking world. Her prolific career, spanning from the late 19th to the early 20th century, was marked by the translation of over seventy volumes of Russian literary works, profoundly influencing the perception of Russian literature in the West. Garnett's translations encompassed the works of eminent Russian authors such as Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Chekhov, and Gogol, with her renditions of Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) and Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1878) being particularly celebrated (Jabboury, 1992; Ghazzi, 2001).



Born	19 December 1861 Brighton, England
Died	17 December 1946 (aged 84) The Cearne, Crockham Hill, Kent, England
Education	Brighton and Hove High School Newnham College, Cambridge
Language	English and Russian

Resilience in the Making: Her Early Triumphs over Adversity

From her teenage years, Constance Garnett demonstrated remarkable resilience in the face of significant challenges. Despite grappling with a weakened heart due to rheumatic fever and contending with severe visual impairment, Garnett's intellectual fervor and unyielding determination remained undiminished. These personal adversities did not deter her from pursuing her passion. Instead, they forged a path for her extraordinary career in translation. Influenced by her father's interest in German literature and her mother's French translations, Garnett's early exposure to the world of languages and cultures nurtured her innate talent for translation. This foundation set the stage for her eventual ascension as a pivotal cultural bridge, profoundly connecting Russian literature with the English-speaking audience. Her early struggles, far from impeding her, contributed to shaping a resilient character, enabling her to leave an indelible mark in the field of literary translation. Moreover, her academic prowess shone brightly, culminating in a scholarship to Newnham College, Cambridge, in 1879, making her the youngest at the college (Wennevitz, 1991; Jabboury, 1992).

Bridging Cultures by Translating Souls

Constance Garnett's contributions to the literary dialogue between Russia and the English-speaking world are unparalleled, particularly highlighted in her masterful translations of Chekhov's works. Her translations, marked by clarity and precision, transcended mere linguistic conversion to become transformative cultural exchanges. They opened new vistas in English literature, significantly impacting the development of modernist literature in Europe and America, and altered the trajectory of the English short story tradition.

Garnett's influence was profound and far-reaching, as noted by Russian historian Edward Crankshaw in 1947. He celebrated her for not only presenting Chekhov in his full stature to English literature but also for creating a new literary form in the process. This included capturing the quintessence of Chekhov's narratives - his unadorned portrayals of ordinary lives and thoughts. Modernist writers of the early 20th century, including Katherine Mansfield and A.E. Coppard, drew inspiration from her translations, seeing in them a new literary benchmark. John Middleton Murry's 1922 critique in *The Athenaeum* underscored Garnett's exceptional ability to convey Chekhov's narrative subtleties and his unconventional storytelling, which he found disorienting yet enlightening (D.H. Lawrence in Jabboury, 1992; Ghazzi, 2001).

Garnett's translation philosophy was clear: it was more than a profession; it was a vocation and a message in itself. She was critical of translations lacking in-depth understanding of the original texts, emphasizing that her motivation was not monetary but a profound love for literature and its conveyance. Her methodologies and philosophies cement her legacy as a translator who bridged not just linguistic gaps but also connected hearts and minds across different cultures (Garnett 1991, qtd. in Ghazzi, 2001).