

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF GREED

Based on Leo Tolstoy's

C1 – C2 | Advanced

"How Much Land Does a Man Need?"

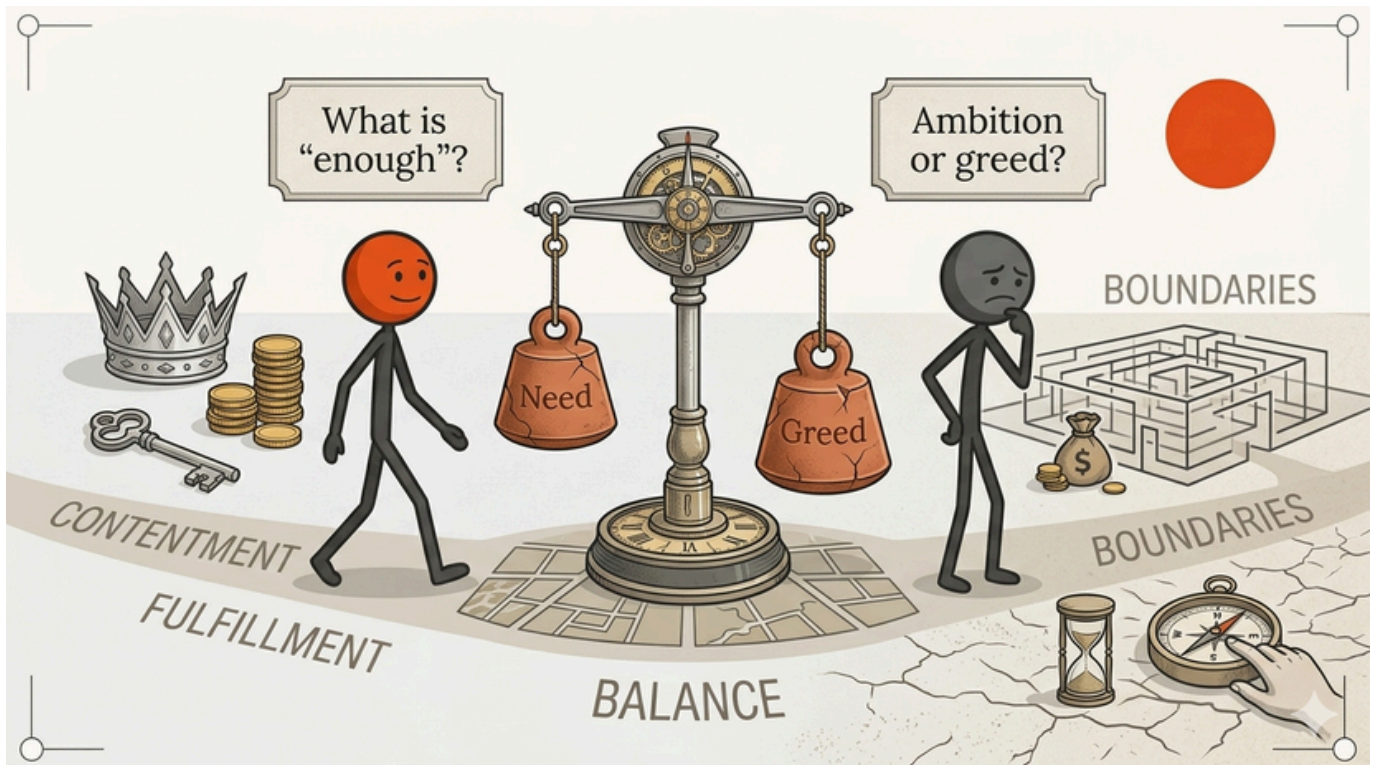
This lesson explores one of literature's most powerful moral fables – a story about ambition, desire, and the question every person must eventually face: **what is truly enough?** Through reading, listening, and discussion, you will analyse Tolstoy's timeless themes and examine how they connect to human behaviour today.

In this lesson you will:

- ◆ Discuss themes of ambition and greed
- ◆ Build advanced vocabulary from the story
- ◆ Analyse a reading extract with gap-fill tasks
- ◆ Listen to a philosophical dialogue
- ◆ Study participial clauses at C1-C2 level
- ◆ Write and discuss your own views

1 warm up

Discuss the following questions with a partner before reading.



Answer the following questions. Share your ideas with a partner.

1. How do you define "enough" when it comes to wealth or success, and what shapes that definition for you personally?
2. Why do people often continue to desire more, even after achieving comfort or stability? What psychological forces are at work?
3. In your view, what is the difference between **healthy ambition** and **destructive greed**? Where is the line?
4. How can the pursuit of material success affect a person's relationships and character over time?
5. Do you think limits on wealth or ownership lead to greater happiness, or do they restrict personal freedom? Why?

2 vocabulary

Pre-reading vocabulary. Complete this exercise before you read the story.

Peasant

Dangerous

Disputes

Abundant

Desire

Generous

Boundary

Exhaustion

Desperate

Greed

Exercise: Match each word (1–10) with the correct definition (A–J). Write the letter in the answer column.

#	Word	Answer	Definition
1	Peasant	---	A. A strong wish or craving for something
2	Dangerous	---	B. Having plenty of something; more than enough
3	Disputes	---	C. The state of extreme physical or mental tiredness; complete depletion of energy
4	Abundant	---	D. Willing to give or share more than expected
5	Desire	---	E. Conflicts or arguments between people
6	Generous	---	F. A poor farmer or rural worker
7	Boundary	---	G. A limit or border that marks an area
8	Exhaustion	---	H. A strong and selfish desire for more than is needed
9	Desperate	---	I. Feeling or showing a sense of hopeless urgency
10	Greed	---	J. Likely to cause harm or trouble

Extension: Choose three of the words above and write your own original sentence for each, using a professional or literary context.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

3 reading

Match the Missing Phrases — Read and fill in each gap (1-5) with the correct phrase.

How Much Land Does a Man Need? Adapted from Leo Tolstoy, 1886

Pahom, a simple peasant, once listened as his wife argued with her elder sister about life in the countryside and the city. The sister praised comfort and wealth, while Pahom's wife defended the quiet strength of rural life. As Pahom listened, a dangerous thought took root in his mind. He believed that if only he had enough land, he would fear nothing, not even the Devil himself. Unseen, the Devil heard this bold claim and smiled, **(1)** _____.

Soon after, an opportunity appeared. A local landowner decided to sell her estate, and Pahom quickly gathered his savings to buy a portion of it. At first, he felt proud and secure. He walked across his land with joy, imagining endless possibilities. Yet this happiness did not last. Small disputes with neighbours began to grow. People let their animals wander onto his fields, and Pahom became angry and strict, **(2)** _____.

Driven by frustration, Pahom sold his land and moved to a distant region where land was cheaper and more abundant. There, he gained even more fields and enjoyed greater success. His crops grew strong, and his wealth increased. Still, his hunger for land did not fade. Each new field only sharpened his desire for more, **(3)** _____.

One day, Pahom heard of a distant tribe known as the Bashkirs, who owned vast stretches of land. They were said to be simple and generous people, willing to sell as much land as a man could walk around in a single day for a small price. Excited by this astonishing offer, Pahom travelled far to meet them, **(4)** _____.

The Bashkirs welcomed him warmly and explained the strange bargain. At sunrise, Pahom could begin marking out his land by walking in any direction he chose. He would set markers along the way, forming a boundary. By sunset, he had to return to the starting point. All the land he enclosed would be his, but if he failed to return in time, he would lose everything.

At dawn, filled with excitement, Pahom set off across the open plains. The land stretched endlessly before him, rich and inviting. He walked quickly at first, then pushed himself further, driven by the thought that more land meant greater power. As the sun climbed higher, the heat grew intense, but Pahom refused to stop.

By afternoon, he realised he had gone too far. Panic struck him as he saw the sun beginning to fall. His body ached, his throat burned, and his legs trembled with exhaustion. Yet he forced himself to run, desperate to reach the starting point before sunset. His breath became sharp and painful, but still he ran, driven by fear and greed.

At last, just as the sun dipped below the horizon, Pahom reached the starting point and collapsed. The Bashkirs cheered, but their laughter faded as they saw that Pahom lay lifeless on the ground. His servant quickly dug a grave, **(5)** _____. In the end, that small piece of earth was all the land Pahom truly needed.

PHRASES (A-G) — TWO WILL NOT BE USED

- A. forming a boundary B. his mind filled with dreams of limitless ownership C. eager to test him
- D. imagining endless possibilities E. measuring just six feet from head to heel F. guarding his land as if it were gold
- G. as though the earth itself whispered promises he could not resist

4 reading comprehension

Answer the following questions in your own words. Use evidence from the text.

Answer all questions in full sentences. Aim for 2-4 sentences per answer.

1. What belief motivates Pahom's actions at the beginning of the story, and how does it shape his decisions throughout?

2. How does Pahom's character change after he becomes a landowner?

3. Why does Pahom remain dissatisfied despite increasing his wealth and land?

4. What is significant about the Bashkirs' offer, and why does it appeal to Pahom?

5. How does the setting of the open plains contribute to the tension in the story?

6. What role does *time* play in Pahom's final attempt to gain land?

7. What is the central message of the story, and how is it revealed through the ending?

5 language point: participial clauses

Read about this structure and complete the exercises below.

Participial Clauses for Advanced Writing and Analysis

A **participial clause** is a dependent clause that begins with a participle (present *-ing*, past *-ed/-en*, or perfect *having + past participle*). They are widely used in literary and academic English to add information concisely, show cause, sequence, or manner – without repeating the subject.

Type	Form	Meaning / Use	Example from the story
Present	Verb + -ing	Simultaneous action or cause	"Walking across the plains, Pahom dreamed of more land."
Past	Verb + -ed / -en	Passive or completed state before main action	"Driven by frustration, Pahom sold his land."
Perfect	Having + past participle	Action completed before the main clause	"Having walked too far, he realised his mistake."

PRESENT PARTICIPIAL

"Walking across the plains, Pahom dreamed of more land." → He was walking across the plains **while** he dreamed of more land.

PAST / PASSIVE PARTICIPIAL

"Filled with excitement, Pahom set off at dawn." → **Because** he was filled with excitement, he set off at dawn.

PERFECT PARTICIPIAL

"Having gained land, he wanted even more." → **After** gaining land, he wanted even more.

NEGATIVE FORM

"Not knowing when to stop, he ran until he collapsed." → Add **Not** before the participle to negate.

i Key rule: The subject of the participial clause must be the *same* as the subject of the main clause. "Driving home, the rain began to fall" is incorrect – the rain was not driving. ✗

Part A: Identify the participial clause in each sentence and state its type (present / past / perfect).

- Exhausted by his journey, Pahom collapsed at the starting point.
Type: _____
- Having sold his first plot of land, he moved to a more fertile region.
Type: _____
- Walking quickly at first, Pahom pushed himself to go further and further.
Type: _____
- Driven by the belief that more land meant safety, he never questioned his desires.
Type: _____

Part B: Combine each pair of sentences using an appropriate participial clause.

- He was convinced that land equalled power. He refused to listen to reason.

- Sara had finished her argument. She looked calmly at Arif.

- He did not know where to stop. He kept walking until it was too late.

6 listening

You will listen to a dialogue between two speakers discussing the story. Complete all tasks.

Scene: Evening. A quiet room.

Sara and Arif have just finished reading the story and are now debating its meaning.
Listen carefully and complete the tasks on this page and the next.

Part A: Fill in the Gaps. Listen to the audio and fill in the missing word or phrase in each sentence.

1. "I think you're looking at the ending and judging everything from that point, while I'm trying to look at the _____ that led him there."
2. "But there's a moment where fear stops being the driver and _____ takes over."
3. "You say 'enough' as if it's an objective standard, but it's not, it's _____."
4. "That self-deception is what makes greed so dangerous, because it doesn't feel like greed when you're _____ it."
5. "I see him as someone who allowed fear to _____ itself as ambition."

Part B: Listening Comprehension. Answer in your own words after listening to the full dialogue.

1. What reason does **Arif** give to explain why the man kept pushing for more, even when he had enough?

2. According to **Sara**, what are the observable signs that someone has gone too far in their pursuit?

3. How does **Sara** define the distinction between healthy ambition and dangerous ambition?

Part C: Discussion. Discuss these questions in pairs or small groups.

1. Why does Arif believe it is hard for someone to recognise their mistakes while they are still in the middle of them? Do you agree?
2. Sara argues that fear can disguise itself as ambition. What does she mean by this? How convincing is her argument?
3. The dialogue suggests that "enough" is both subjective and observable. How can something be both at the same time?
4. Which speaker – Sara or Arif – do you agree with more, and why? Reference specific points from the conversation.

Transcript

Listening Dialogue—Sara & Arif

Scene: Evening. A quiet room. Both have just finished discussing the story.

SARA (leaning forward, voice thoughtful but probing)

I'm trying to understand your position, but the more you explain it, the more it sounds like you're defending a man who clearly destroyed himself through his own choices, and I don't see how that can be reduced to something as simple as "he wanted security."

ARIF (sits upright, calm but firm)

I'm not reducing it, I'm expanding it, because I think you're looking at the ending and judging everything from that point, while I'm trying to look at the **mindset** that led him there, and from that perspective, his decisions are not irrational, they're actually quite human.

SARA (quick, slightly frustrated)

Human, yes, but also deeply flawed, and the problem is that you're describing those flaws as if they're reasonable, when in reality they're exactly what led to his downfall.

ARIF (leans forward, more engaged)

But flaws don't appear out of nowhere, they come from experience, and if someone spends their life with uncertainty, with the constant fear that what they have can be taken away at any moment, then it makes perfect sense that they would keep pushing for more, not out of greed, but out of fear.

SARA (shakes head, voice gaining intensity)

But there's a moment, and you can't deny this, there's always a moment where fear stops being the driver and **desire** takes over, and in his case, that moment came long before the end, because he already had enough to live comfortably, yet he kept going.

ARIF (tightens his jaw, slightly defensive)

You say "enough" as if it's an objective standard, but it's not, it's **subjective**, it depends on what a person has lived through, what they value, and what they are trying to protect themselves from.

SARA (interrupting, overlapping slightly)

No, it's not completely subjective, because there are clear signs when someone crosses the line, like when their pursuit starts damaging their relationships, their peace of mind, or their health, and he showed all of those signs.

ARIF (voice rising slightly, speaking faster)

But that's easy to say from the outside, when you're not the one making the decisions in real time, when you're not the one feeling that pressure, because from his perspective, every step probably felt justified, even necessary.

SARA (pauses, then slower, more intense)

That's exactly the problem, Arif, because people convince themselves that what they're doing is necessary, even when it clearly isn't, and that self-deception is what makes greed so dangerous, because it doesn't feel like greed when you're **inside** it.

ARIF (stops, takes a breath, then quieter but firm)

So what are you saying, that ambition itself is dangerous?

SARA (shakes head, softer but precise)

No, I'm saying ambition without awareness is dangerous, because ambition on its own can build something meaningful, but when it's driven by fear or insecurity, it becomes endless, and that's when it starts to consume the person.

ARIF (looks down briefly, then back up, reflective but still resistant)

I can agree with that in theory, but I still think you're underestimating how difficult it is for someone to recognise that shift while they're in the middle of it.

SARA (*gently, but with conviction*)

It is difficult, I'm not denying that, but difficulty doesn't remove responsibility, and at some point, he had enough evidence to stop, yet he chose not to.

ARIF (*leans back, exhales, frustration showing*)

Or maybe he didn't see it as a choice, maybe he saw it as the only way forward, because when you've built your thinking around the idea that "more equals safety," stopping feels like risking everything.

SARA (*leans in, voice softer but more intense*)

But that belief is exactly what trapped him, because he wasn't actually becoming safer, he was becoming more vulnerable with every step, physically, mentally, and emotionally.

ARIF (*long pause, quieter now*)

That's... true, but it's also clear only in hindsight.

SARA (*nods slowly*)

Yes, but good judgement often requires stepping back before hindsight forces you to, and that's what he failed to do.

ARIF (*voice softer, more reflective*)

So you see him as someone who lacked self-awareness.

SARA (*calm, steady*)

I see him as someone who allowed fear to **disguise** itself as ambition, and once that happens, it becomes very hard to tell the difference between what you need and what you're chasing just because you can.

ARIF (*quiet, thoughtful*)

And you think that's something people should be able to catch in themselves?

SARA (*gently*)

I think they have to, because if they don't, they risk building their entire life around something that will never actually satisfy them.

ARIF (*slight, uneasy smile*)

You know what's uncomfortable about all of this?

SARA (*softly*) What?

ARIF (*slow, honest*)

The fact that I can still understand why he kept going, even knowing how it ends.

SARA (*quiet, empathetic*)

Of course you can, because that's what makes the story powerful, it's not about a foolish man, it's about a pattern that exists in all of us.

ARIF (*looks down, then back up, subdued*)

Yeah... and that's exactly why it's unsettling.

SARA (*soft, final tone*)

Because it forces you to ask where your own "enough" really is.

(Silence. Both sit still, the weight of the idea settling between them.)

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