

Pierre Bezukhov (in Tolstoy, *War and Peace*) **conscientious**

Overview Leo Tolstoy was a towering figure of the Russian novel and short story, as well as a vocal and influential public figure. He is uniquely respected for his novel *Anna Karenina* (1873-1877) and for his huge novel/study of *War and Peace* (1869), which deals with five Russian aristocratic families, and the impact on them of the Napoleonic invasion of their country, during six months in 1812. Among the causes to which he devoted passionate attention were Pacifism and radical Christianity in the strict vein of The Sermon on the Mount. His arguments for radical Pacifism had profound echoes in the public sphere, through the work of such men as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King.

Character The literary character of Pierre Bezukhov spans a stormy life period, in which we first see him returning to Russia from France, in 1805. (He has come to see his dying father, and eventually to collect his inheritance.) From that point we follow him through periods of wild oats and debauchery, Freemasonry, active support of Russian troops near Moscow, numerology—in which he convinces himself he is destined to kill Napoleon, but in fact harms no one—and ultimately (his real goal) marriage and children with the now mature Natasha whom he had courted earlier. The mature married Bezukhov becomes a caring figure of spontaneous energies, great good heartedness, and a desire to learn wherever he can.

Parallels Bezukhov is an elusive and rare figure, full of life and dreams, in younger years quite the urban rogue and mystic, at all ages a flexible and friendly bear of a guy. For parallels we cannot do better than go for the life-lovers, who throw themselves into the Human Comedy: two Renaissance giants of vitality, Don Quixote and Falstaff (in Shakespeare's *Henry V*), and who share a rich emotional intelligence with Bezukhov. *Tristram Shandy* (1759) is Laurence Sterne's contribution to character merriment, eccentricity, and private genius. Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn, though just a kid, picks up wickedly on the *joies de vivre* nestled in ordinary Midwestern River life, and plays out life as anticly and fondly as Pierre; which same praise might be reserved for that later Huck Finn, Holden Caulfield in *Catcher in the Rye* (1951), who though a privileged Central Park kid appears to have been born into a good natured and risk taking love of life, quite in Bezukov's vein.

Illustrative moments

Sensual The whirlpool of sensuality into which Pierre descends is intense. Here we are, in the midst of one of Anna Pavlovna's soirées: 'She was, as always at dinner parties, wearing a dress cut very low at front and in back. Her bust, which had always seemed like marble to Pierre, was so close to him that his shortsighted eyes could not but perceive the living charm of her neck and shoulders...' And so on. To top it all, this lady who is far ahead of the curve, asks Pierre whether he had 'noticed that I am a woman'? And at this moment, as happens often, Pierre felt that this woman must be his wife.

Jealous As happens several times—in this high social world of pleasure-- Pierre becomes vulnerable to jealousy. He becomes convinced that Helene Kuragin--his sexy partner for as long as her private life was partly hidden from him—is moving with other men, and probably—the evidence is assembling—has been sleeping with the handsome Dolokhov, who openly provokes Pierre in a public setting. Pierre challenges the guy to a duel, is taken up on it, and by luck manages to shoot his opponent in the side, and not to be hit by a return shot. Pierre, however, is not surprisingly appalled by the physical wounding, but captivated by the noise and violence he has gone through.

Spiritual Entries in Pierre's diary, in the years immediately following his duel, and his encounter with the Masons, benchmark his developments in spirituality. 24th November: 'I am going to bed with a happy and tranquil mind. Great God, help me to walk in thy paths, to conquer anger by calmness and deliberation, to vanquish lust by self-restraint and repulsion, to withdraw from worldliness...' These entries, which will be dating, now, from an early mid-life Pierre, will indicate how far the man has come since his return to Russia at the time of his father's death.

Courageous Pierre's spiritual growth goes hand in hand with his readiness to do good. He is wandering about looking for some way to kill Napoleon—his insane numerological driver-- through the wild blaze which is consuming Moscow. The French are retreating, buildings are collapsing, and Pierre is summoned by a woman who tells him that her child is trapped in the burning building before them. Pierre plunges in, through smoke and flames, and rescues the little girl, whom he drags to safety, although in her terror at him she is slobbering and biting him so that he can hardly endure it.

Self-sacrificing Not long after Pierre's saving of the little girl, he is given another opportunity to prove that he can contribute to the whole world. In the wrecked and burning condition of the city, he comes upon a beautiful Armenian woman sitting in the ruins of the city. Just as a necklace is being torn from her neck, by one of two guys who threatened to rape her, Pierre exclaimed, hoarsely, 'let that woman alone, seizing the soldier by his round shoulders and throwing him aside.' Ultimately bound and taken away by a small contingent of French soldiers, Pierre has made his point and saved the woman.

Discussion questions

Pierre is regularly described as a big awkward guy, 'a bear of a man.' Is that what people like about him? Or is it some inner quality of his personality?

At what point in the novel does Pierre's 'spirituality' begin to manifest itself? Are you prepared for his 'return to God'?

Is there any comic element to Pierre? Does he qualify in any way as heroic?