

WAR AND PEACE

Leo Tolstoy

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. (Prince Volkonsky, a military man and ardent admirer of Napoleon, represents one of those families.) Among the causes to which Tolstoy devoted passionate attention were Pacifism and radical Christianity in the strict vein of Jesus Christ's The Sermon on the Mount. Tolstoy's arguments for radical Pacifism have had profound echoes in the public sphere, through the work of such men as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King.

Story

War and Peace is a vast novel, concerning five interconnected Russian families.

The events involved in the novel open in the city of St. Petersburg in 1805, at the time when Napoleon's conquests in Europe had so expanded that even countries like Russia, on the margin of Europe, were beginning to tremble. Many of the characters in the novel are introduced to us at a dinner party in Moscow, most notably Pierre Bezukhov, the appealing illegitimate son of a count—and a significant figure throughout the novel, and Andrei Volkonsky, son of a retired military commander. The remaining three families, about whom the novel will turn, are all represented at this seminal dinner party, which sets the stage for a vast panorama of 'war' and 'peace.'

As the narrative develops, its primary mover becomes the war itself. Russian troops are deployed, in alliance with the Austrian Empire, to defend the Western front against Napoleon's forces. (Andrew, and other figures in the novel, go off to war; figures, by the way, who are with one exception, Andrei Volkonsky, based on 'real life' persons.)

A complex network of family associations begins to spread out over the language. Andrew is seriously wounded, and for a long time is presumed dead, while Pierre, Andrew's closest buddy, is appointed heir of his father's estate, and goes on to marry Helen, daughter of the Kuragin family, who promptly cheats on him. Pierre challenges the seducer to a duel and nearly, but not fully, kills him.

Then Andrew's wife gives birth to a son just as Andrew returns to his estate. (You see the interlacing of personal histories as this vast panorama of aristocratic existence plays out, in a verbal documentary, seen from the inside.) But Andrew's wife dies in child birth, and it is left to Andrew's devout sister to raise the baby. Pierre—synchronously with the events in Andrew's family—gets tired of married life, which hasn't worked very well for him, and devotes himself increasingly to the practice of Freemasonry, which he attempts to apply to the challenges of estate management; and with which he attempts to entice the attention of his skeptical friend, Andrei. The attempt is only partly successful, as Andrei is by that time involved with a movement for reform in the Russian government.

Do you see the denseness of plot development in this massive novel? Look at the next stage!

A third of the five families, who are central to the novel, the Rostovs, begins to founder, thanks to their son Nicholas' gambling debts. Nicholas is advised to marry a rich heiress, to avert the sale of the family estate, but as his military career rolls on—he witnesses the signing of the Great Peace between Napoleon and Tsar Alexander—his sister Natasha attends her first ball, and lo and behold finds herself falling in love with none other than Andrei Volkonsky. Andrei's dad insists that the affianced couple wait a year before marriage, and Andrei goes off to travel.

While he is away, Natasha falls in love with Anatole Kuragin—further family entanglement—and is subsequently rejected by Andrei. A thousand pages later the novel is brought to a conclusion, but no neat ending, by the marriage of Pierre and Natasha, the marriage of Nicholas and Mary, and the sense that life goes on, through war and peace, entangling and then unpackaging itself.

Themes

The major theme is that **life goes on**, through history, drama, boredom, desire, pain; it just goes on. History is vast, human will power is an important ingredient in it. But history is larger than any human agency.

An important theme is that **graciousness and good nature**, such as we see them in Pierre, can be effective agents in human affairs. Pierre's generosity and openness of spirit inspire those around him.

Characters

Prince Andrei Volkonsky is the only purely fictional literary character in *War and Peace*. The Prince greatly admires Napoleon, whom he 'meets' on the battlefield, and thus becomes a fitting mouthpiece for Tolstoy's belief that history is largely created by 'great men.' (Though Volkonsky himself later changes his mind about that point.) As a fictive character Volkonsky gets built before our eyes: young and happily married, but not for long; a dashing military officer, risking his life on the battlefield, and getting rescued and befriended by Napoleon; returning wounded to convalesce, and finding his wife seriously ill in childbirth; passing on from her death to committed care for his son; finding a new love, eventually, and planning for a second marriage—which does not work out; dealing with his growing cynicism and disillusionment—here is the enlightened 'rational' face of the man; finally, never having totally recovered from his battlefield wound, passing away in the arms of the woman he had targeted for marriage number two, but whom fate had blocked from him.

Pierre Bezukhov. 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.

Pierre Bezukhov (conscientious)

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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 capsized 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?

Prince Andrew Volkonsky (determined)

Character Prince Andrew Volkonsky is an aristocratic peer and friend of Pierre Bezukov, and yet he is essentially different from Pierre, the two serving as complements of one another. Pierre is very physical, sexually driven, clumsy, while Andrew is an upper body person, always reflecting or projecting. From the outset we see Andrew advising Pierre against marriage—though Andrew is married, and his wife pregnant—while Andrew is himself busy with studying military tactics, planning for reorganizations of the army, or, on several occasions, becoming the site of hallucinatory or out of body experiences. After being seriously wounded in battle, saved only by Napoleon, Andrew is drawn back into life by his love for Natasha, and in the end, approaching his own death, he is devoted to the importance of divine love, of which he reads in the Christian Gospels.

Parallels Volkonsky is a multi-faceted character: proud, handsome, intellectual, brave, yet at the same time withdrawn and cynical. One thinks first of Achilles, Homer's ultimately tragic figure, who will sulk on a dime, if his girlfriend is taken away, yet who contains the charismatic power to win a war. For proud withdrawal, Volkonsky has a parallel in Sigrid Undset's Erlend Nikolausson, whose pride can easily withhold him from what he loves; in *Kristin Lavransdottir* (1920). To the tragic side of Volkonsky—his wounding in battle, his loss of his wife—there's a parallel with Jim (in Conrad's *Lord Jim*, 1900), a man never quite able to rise above earlier 'life defeats.' Finally, Lydgate, in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871), a complex man whose love for his wife always seems slightly below him.

Illustrative moments

Superior We first encounter Andrew Volkonsky in the reception room of Anna Pavlovna, the aunt of Pierre Bezukov. 'He was a very handsome young man, of medium height, with firm, clear-cut features. Everything about him, from his weary, bored expression to his quiet, measured step, offered a striking contrast to his lively little wife.' Of all whom he considered boring, his wife seems to have come first. In fact, on this occasion, it is only Pierre that Andrew seems pleased to see again. We feel little potential here for the construction of a happy life.

Dissatisfied On their first meeting, Andrew and Pierre disagree about the significance of the major event surrounding them, the pressure for conquest coming from Napoleon's Empire. For Pierre Napoleon is the world's 'greatest man,' and should not be opposed, but Andrew counters that if everyone followed his own convictions there would be no war. When pressed on this, he replies that he is in fact going to war 'because the life I am leading here does not suit me.' Andrew seemingly has no objection to the idea of war, and rejects Pierre's idea that the world would be better without war.

Bored Andrew expresses himself freely with Pierre, his foil in the structure of this novel. Pierre has returned to the heady social atmosphere of Moscow, ready for romance and high living, but Andrew, who is in fact married and whose wife is pregnant, warns Pierre against marriage.

'Never, never marry, my dear fellow!...never marry til you can say to yourself that you have done all you are capable of, and until you have ceased to love the woman of your choice, and have seen her plainly as she is.' Andrew's evident boredom with his own wife both supports and undermines the value of the advice he is giving Pierre.

Strategist Andrew, not unexpectedly, leaves for war in the course of his wife's pregnancy. Before departing he explains to his aged father just what the upcoming strategy is, for combating Napoleon. His interest in the war appears to be mainly strategic, for—to his father's total boredom—he details the positions of the various armies that are being aligned against France. His humanity is brought out only as he prepares to leave for the front, when his sister, Princess Mary, pulls out a revered family icon for him to wear. 'I am glad, really, dear, I am very glad,' he says to his sister, touched by the implications of this gift.

Loving Andrew is wounded in battle, and luckily saved by Napoleon, who lets him go. When he gets back to his wife's estate he finds her in labor with their child, and, not long after the birth, is by her side as she dies from giving birth. Andrew is deeply touched by the powerful coincidence of events, and determines to treat his son and family well in the future. He is shocked back into an appreciation of life. Now that he is living for others, he tells Pierre later, he is happy and calm, whereas in the military—where he seemed to be working for others—he was in fact only seeking his own glory.

Discussion questions

Why does Volkonsky, even while married, advise Pierre against marriage? Does Volkonsky simply feel bored with his marriage? Or does he dislike the institution?

Why is Volkonsky so moved when, as he is heading out to war, his sister Mary gives him a 'revered family icon' to wear?

How has Volkonsky changed by the end of the novel? Is he convincingly ready to 'live for others?'

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