

War and Peace
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War and Peace needs no introduction, so this unneeded one will be short. In this essay, I will simply comment on a few things that stand out to me during my second reading of this great work, one of the most famous in world literature.

When reading a major work like this for the first time, one is mostly trying to get one's bearings. Noticing subtle details is hard to do when you don't know where things are going. From my first reading three and a half years ago, my memory was that the book was all over the place and I was inclined to fault Tolstoy for writing a work that seemed so sprawling. That perception was incorrect. During my second reading, I have been observing just how finely structured and well-balanced the book is. Each of the three main characters, Prince Andrew, Count Pierre Bezukhov, and Nicholas Rostov receives approximately equal time in the story as the action moves from following one character to another. The minor characters, of which there are a great many, also receive balanced treatment, with Sonya, Natasha, Dolokhov, Denisov, Helene, and others appearing again and again, giving the reader time to get to know them. Over time, the reader finds out that some of these characters are people one would rather not get to know, but that is the point.

A second facet of the work is its enormous scope, which is, of course, what one expects in an epic novel. In this novel we have war scenes, balls, salon conversation, love affairs, personal affairs, duels, hunting, Masons, gambling, attempts to help the serfs, drinking, and various hijinks, and all these are brilliantly treated in minute detail. It is impossible to tire of reading this book.

A third facet, one which I hope we will discuss at some length tonight, is the extended treatment given to some of the main characters' private reflections. Examples of such passages include Prince Andrew's reflections about life when he is wounded and Pierre's thoughts about the Masons and about society in general. Some of these passages are linked together with common themes. Prince Andrew reflects on how it is impossible to express all one thinks; a few pages later Bezukhov thinks that what he always wanted most was to convey his thoughts to others just as he understood it; then Natasha keeps thinking that no one could understand all that she understood and all there was in her; then at Andrew's proposal to her she thinks, Why speak when words cannot express what one feels; finally Pierre muses that he understands the deception and the confusion, and wonders, But how am I to tell them all that I see?

Fourth, I want to draw attention to Tolstoy's characterization. One of the interesting things about it is that Tolstoy serves up every character with a detailed description of praiseworthy characteristics, negative or shameful characteristics, and characteristics that are neither. Most writers emphasize the good elements of the good guys and the bad elements of the bad guys, enabling the reader to discern easily which are which. But in this book, we don't have good guys and bad guys, we just have people, with their varying tendencies toward noble or ignoble behavior, just as it is with most real people. Most noble individuals also harbor negative attitudes such as pride or narrowmindedness, just as it is with Prince Andrew. Most reckless young people also have their good qualities, just as it is with Nicholas Rostov. And even venal people have their good sides, just as it is with Prince Vasily. I cannot recall another book in which characterization was handled this way and to the extent that Tolstoy does it in War and Peace.

Fifth, Tolstoy's comments on the futility and stupidity of war are a highlight.

Finally, one of the delights of the book is the hundreds of ways Tolstoy comments on the society around him. He mocks the opera, he bashes doctors, which was probably fair in 1812, he comments on the qualities of military leaders, and he lets us see into the hearts—for better or worse—of dozens of people.

In a book as rich as this one, there is no end of topics to explore, so let's get to it.