Some Ideas and Concepts Underlying the Characters and Events

Humanism

What is commonly caused the Renaissance came to Russia about two hundred years late. In the early eighteenth century, the Russian Tsar Peter the Great made a tour of Europe and returned to Russia determined that his country should “catch up” with the new developments in technology, commerce, and social organization that the Renaissance had engendered in Europe. Over the next one hundred years, the Russian government was re-organized into a bureaucratic hierarchy, and the Russian aristocracy adopted European manners, clothing, and social customs. In particular, the aristocracy adopted French almost universally as a second language, and in many cases used it more than Russian. This adoption of French is the source for all the French dialogue in War and Peace. For Tolstoy, however, the use of French usually indicates conversation or correspondence that is affected, superficial, and insincere.

Renaissance means “rebirth,” and what was “reborn” during the Renaissance was a fresh appreciation of the principles of order and harmony characteristic of the classical cultures of Greece and Rome. Classical thinkers and artists may have been pagans, but eminently moral pagans. Somehow they had behaved morally and sought truth without the benefit of Christian doctrine.

Thus, the Renaissance humanists, inspired by the harmony and order they perceived in classical art and philosophy, came to believe that the exercise of the human will in pursuit of order, proportion, and truth was just as legitimate a form of Christian activity as piously following Church doctrine and practice. Because the human being is “made in the image of God,” and thus carries the divine spark of creation, the human will can redeem itself by virtuous actions that harmonize the human will with the divine will.

Inevitably, though, the secular aspect of humanism gained more and more prominence. Eventually, especially through the writings of the Renaissance governmental theorist Machiavelli, the concept of virtuous action in harmony with God came to be understood as virtu, the capacity to act decisively, and even ruthlessly, to further personal or national goals. In War and Peace, Prince Andrei’s practice of virtu, and its conflict with Christian virtue, forms the basis for his ongoing tragic dilemma.

The Enlightenment

1. As this more practical and scientific aspect of humanism took hold, what we call the Enlightenment occurred during the eighteenth century, primarily in France, England, America, and Germany. Enlightenment thinkers believed that there was an inherent order to the universe which they could discover by precise observation and measurement. This order found expression through laws that governed reality. Once people could discern these “laws of nature,” they could use that knowledge to manipulate nature to human advantage. Modern science, industrial engineering, capitalist economics, and even democratic government are all products of the Enlightenment.
2. The human mind, through its powers of reasoning, gains power over physical nature. In fact, even the human body becomes a physical object, subject to the dictates of reason. Thus, ideal human behavior becomes that of the stoic, the person who can govern and order the passions, which are a danger to clarity of thought and propriety of behavior. In America, George Washington became the symbol of this “enlightened” virtue. Benjamin Franklin, another important “enlightened” American, and the first internationally recognized American scientist, put considerable effort into governing his behavior systematically according to “the dictates of reason,” thereby attempting to perfect himself.

In War and Peace, the “Old Prince” Nikolai Bolkonsky exemplifies the Enlightenment in almost everything he does: the constant practical activity, the enforcement of strict “order” in his household, the education of his daughter in geometry and mathematics, his (totally artificial) elevation of commoners like his architect and Madmoiselle Bourienne to positions of “equality” at his dinner table. We American readers can certainly see in the Old Prince aspects of George Washington (the stoicism and military bearing), Thomas Jefferson (the perverse conflation of ideals of equality with the practice of holding other humans in servitude and bondage), and Benjamin Franklin (his practical activity and scientific enthusiasm). His nickname, “the King of Prussia,” comes from the fact that he still dresses himself and his servants in eighteenth century periwigs and waistcoats, following the fashion established by Frederick the Great of Prussia, probably Europe’s best-known “enlightened” monarch.

3. Physical nature can now be surveyed and bounded, overlaid with an abstract grid of human mental creation. The famous “Mason-Dixon Line,” establishing the official boundary between Pennsylvania and Maryland, was one of the first great surveying projects in America. Nature itself became an object, subject to human will. No one denied that natural forces still had power, but the human capacity to conceptualize and understand how nature worked gave rise to the belief that enlightened humanity was gradually gaining control over nature, a process which came to be known as progress.

**Romanticism**

1. A counter-movement, known as Romanticism, led primarily by poets, philosophers, and artists, began in the latter part of the eighteenth century. They came to believe that the Enlightenment’s pursuit of rational order was too cold-blooded and manipulative. Child labor in factories and slavery on plantations could be “rationalized” as the efficient use of labor, for instance.

2. The Romantics also believed that the natural world was not just a passive object, but a source of inspiration with profound truth to impart if a person could become attuned to what it was “saying.” Too much intellectual sophistication blinded a person to the voice of nature. Instead, one should cultivate a “sensitivity” and openness to the sensuous appeal of the world. The Romantics called this responsiveness to the natural environment beauty. To the Romantics, the experience of beauty proved that the ordering power of the mind and sensory power of the body were working together instead of in opposition. Passionate involvement with one’s environment through sensitivity to beauty gave rise to the power of the imagination; through the use of the imagination, human consciousness, in harmony with nature, could envision new possibilities and adventures. The American Romantic writer Ralph Waldo Emerson gave the titles “Nature” and “Imagination” to two of his most famous essays.
3. The Romantics thus questioned the rational, stoic, outlook of the Enlightenment. For the Romantics, the emotional, passionate aspect of humanity cannot be denied; in fact, since all perceptions inevitably are colored by the feeling of the perceiver, the person who cultivates his or her sensitivities sees more accurately and fully than the “objective” scientist who is limited to cold facts and the mechanical acquisition of “data.” Therefore, Romanticism tended to promote the imaginative individual, the poet and the artist, as having insight superior to that of the “cold,” rational scientist.

At the start of the story, Pierre Bezukhov is the pre-eminent Romantic in *War and Peace*. Having been educated in Europe, he has fallen under the spell of the new Romantic movement. He almost worships Napoleon as his hero, and ignores practicality for ideals like the liberty, equality, and brotherhood propounded by the French revolution (which he, of course, supports). In the first scene of *War and Peace*, the society hostess Anna Pavlovna rightly fears him as a threat to the social order of the aristocracy. Pierre is also “disorderly” in that he throws himself heedlessly into one experience and enthusiasm after another. A major theme of the story of *War and Peace* is Pierre’s evolution, through his impulsive need for intense experience, from the naïve Romanticism of his youthful self to a more fully realized and functional form of individuality.

**Liberalism**

At the start of the nineteenth century, at the time *War and Peace* begins, the confluence of the Enlightenment and Romanticism brought into being the concept of social liberalism. Tolstoy will subject this new concept to a strong and systematic critique throughout *War and Peace*.

The Industrial Revolution, as well as the political revolutions that took place in America and France, fundamentally changed Western culture. New technologies improved transportation and produced more goods faster; the rise of commercial printing improved literacy and speeded the dissemination of knowledge. With people becoming generally better educated, and with wealth becoming more widely distributed through greater overall productivity, both America and Europe experienced a rapid growth in what sociologists call the middle class, which demanded and received more rights and opportunities from governments. Elected legislative bodies thus gradually supplanted the political power of hereditary rulers, voting and political rights were expanded, and a greater tolerance towards both social criticism and individual behavior gradually emerged. The new social and economic conditions encouraged a sense of individual possibility, which gradually encouraged European societies, and their governments, to take greater account of the individual person’s worth and rights. This structuring of society to give more rights and opportunities to the individual citizen, thus empowering each person to realize that person’s talents and ambition, came to known collectively as liberalism.

Tolstoy clearly rejects many of the implications of liberalism. Liberalism, to Tolstoy, meant a loss of respect for traditional social norms, especially those practiced in a conservative agrarian society, which Russia of the nineteenth century still was. In addition, liberalism promoted ideals that supposedly could be implemented anywhere, which tended to de-emphasize national and cultural identity, introducing a cosmopolitan view that a person, especially one who is educated, is a "citizen of the world" rather than the product of a particular culture. Given Tolstoy’s concern to show the particular strengths and virtues of the traditional Russian culture, he could hardly be comfortable with liberal ideas that diminished the importance of national identity.
When he wrote *War and Peace*, Tolstoy identified **Napoleon** as the archetype of this false worldview. That is, Napoleon saw himself as a "great man," a “romantic hero,” who by virtue of his "larger vision" could justify world conquest in order to rule the world as an enlightened and benevolent despot. Tolstoy claimed that Napoleon’s defeat in Russia came about not because of Russia’s "great men," the Tsar and other aristocrats, but because the Russian people had the patience and endurance to outwait and outwit the French army. The stubborn cultural integrity of Russia could not be homogenized into Napoleon’s cosmopolitan version of empire.

**Important Literary and Rhetorical Terms**

**Literary Terms**

**Picaresque Character:** Tolstoy was very well read in English literature, especially the eighteenth century writer Laurence Stern and his nineteenth century contemporary, Charles Dickens. English authors introduced the picaresque hero during this period, and several of Dickens’ earlier novels feature picaresque characters. Typically, he is a roguish, lower-class character (but with good connections in high places) who bounces unharmed through a variety of amoral and madcap adventures, often to satirically humorous effect. **Pierre** begins *War and Peace* in almost totally picaresque fashion, culminating in his duel with Dolohkov. Pierre’s idealistic enthusiasms and impulsive behavior do not disappear after the trauma of the duel, but Pierre does gradually gain a sense of moral purpose as the story unfolds. Unlike Pierre, his antagonist in the duel, **Dolohkov**, remains the pure picaresque type throughout the novel.

**Epic Simile:** As do epic poets like Dante, Homer, and Milton, Tolstoy employs the epic simile, which is an extended comparison that metaphorically illuminates a situation or character. Tolstoy’s comparison of Anna Pavlovna’s oversight of her party to a spinning mill’s manager looking after the working of the people and machines on p.10 emphasizes the artificial, mechanical content of the high-class social gathering.

**Omniscient Narration:** Tolstoy and Dickens are two of the premier omniscient narrators of nineteenth century literature. Like Dickens, Tolstoy knows his characters “inside and out,” and not only describes them, but evaluates and judges them as well. Tolstoy’s account of Pierre’s rationalizations as he decides to break his promise to Prince Andrei not to attend Kuragin’s and Dolohkov’s dissolute party (p. 31) is an excellent example of Tolstoy’s omniscient approach.

**Rhetorical Terms**

**Rhetoric** is the study of the elements of structure and style in writing or speaking. Tolstoy claimed to have made extensive use of formal rhetorical elements in his writing, and several of his most prominent rhetorical techniques are listed below.

**Decorum:** Decorum can be defined as appropriateness, the matching of form to content, or more practically, using the right form of speech for the environment that one is in. For instance, one of the reasons why Prince Andrei realizes belatedly that he is mismatched with his new bride is the “Little Princess” Liza’s propensity to speak in the flirtatious tone of a society coquette, even though she is pregnant with his child and living within his family circle. She still reflects the false decorum of St. Peterburg “society” behavior. In some ways though, the rhetoric practiced in the Bolkonsky
household—everyone is almost painfully direct—is hardly ideal, either. The search for true rhetoric, language that is honest, simple, unaffected, and sincere, will be an ongoing theme of *War and Peace*.

**Anaphora:** Anaphora is deliberately repeating certain words or phrases to emphasize their significance. For instance, Tolstoy continually refers to Pierre’s wife Helene as “the bare Helene,” referencing the degree to which her shoulders and breasts are exposed in her evening gowns, and thus implying her questionable morality and faithfulness. The translators of our edition have kept all of Tolstoy’s repetitious words and phrases, even when they seem to violate “good style” in English.

**Chiasmus:** Chiasmus is a device whereby the idea expressed in the first part of a sentence is reversed or inverted in the second part of the sentence. Tolstoy makes extensive use of chiasmus to capture either a character’s contradictory emotions or a quick change of mood in a character.

**Some of the Major Goals and Themes of War and Peace**

1. To depict the historical role and cultural identity of Russia at the turn of the nineteenth century as revealed through the response of the nation to the Napoleonic invasion

2. To examine and critique Russian social norms

3. To study the transformation of character through the crucible of traumatic events