Introduction to the Life, Literary Career, and Philosophy of Leo Tolstoy

. . . Although a literary artist, Tolstoy was one of those primitive oaks of men to whom the superfluities and insincerities, the cupidities, complications, and cruelties of our polite civilization are profoundly unsatisfying, and for whom the eternal veracities lie with more natural and animal things. His crisis was the getting of his soul in order, the discovery of its genuine habitat and vocation, the escape from falsehoods into what for him were the ways of truth. . . . Although not many of us can imitate Tolstoy, not having enough, perhaps, of the aboriginal human marrow in our bones, most of us may at least feel that it would be better for us if we could.


Tolstoy’s Career as a Novelist

Leo Tolstoy was born into the high Russian nobility in 1828 (His official name was Count Lev Tolstoy). He received an excellent education and privileged upbringing, but fell into dissipation and irresponsibility upon coming into his substantial inheritance. He entered into military service during the early 1850s, and discovered his vocation as a writer about the same time. His autobiographical trilogy, *Childhood, Boyhood, and Youth* and his realistic, compelling stories of soldiers at the front in the Crimean War gained him a literary reputation. Once he married and settled down on his estate, *Yasnaya Polonya*, he spent most of the 1860s writing his great novel of the French invasion of Russia in 1812, *War and Peace*. He followed the success of *War and Peace* with the novel *Anna Karenina* in the 1870s, the story of a passionate but illicit love affair that entranced all of literate Russia. Both *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* are now considered by critics and scholars to be two of the greatest novels ever written.

Tolstoy and Social Reform

Once his literary career was established in the late 1850s, and having resigned from the Russian army, Tolstoy settled on his estate and began to initiate a series of reforms in its management, particularly his attempts to better the lives of his serfs (peasant workers who lived on his land and were, in effect “owned” by him). He opened a school for peasant children, and made a careful study of educational methods, even traveling to Europe for further research. A reading primer for children that he wrote became a standard text in Russia.

In 1861, when the serfs were emancipated by the tsar, he served as an Arbiter of the Peace, helping to negotiate land settlements, so that the former serfs could now receive grants of land.

After a significant spiritual crisis and conversion in later life, Tolstoy became an outspoken pacifist and critic of the Russian government and Orthodox church. He opposed all military actions by the government, denounced religious oppression, especially of Jews, and encouraged non-violent protest.
In the early 1890s, he organized a massive campaign for famine relief in southern Russia, personally arranging for the distribution of tons of food and grain over the course of the two-year crisis, saving thousands of lives.

Tolstoy wrote numerous essays and moral stories to support his opinions, and he gradually accumulated an international group of “disciples,” some of whom came to live on Tolstoy’s estate in order to more fully advance and promote his ideas (a major source of displeasure for his jealous wife). He also carried on an international correspondence in several languages, and his correspondents included Mohandas Gandhi (“Mahatma Gandhi”), who would ultimately use Tolstoy’s philosophy of non-violent resistance to lead India’s successful independence movement. In the United States, Martin Luther King would employ these same ideas in the American Civil Rights struggle of the 1950s and 1960s.

**Tolstoy’s Critique of Russian “Society”**

Today, with our more democratic outlook, we use the term “society” to mean an entire nation or culture. To Tolstoy, society was the relatively small group of educated, moneyed, and titled Russians at the top who had the resources and leisure time to compete for position among the “best people.” People in this upper-crust “society” were also anxious to display their Europeanized sophistication by speaking French as much or more than Russian.

In the 1860s, after his marriage and while he was writing *War and Peace*, Tolstoy was still trying to evaluate and criticize Russian culture “from the inside.” Plus, *War and Peace* is set in the years 1805-1812, when Russian was still fully feudalistic, and serfdom was still in place. At the time he wrote *War and Peace*, what would become his intense hostility to Russian society life was not yet fully developed, but his critical attitude towards its wholesale adaptation of European Romantic notions emerges as a key theme of the story. In fact, this theme emerges very early in *War and Peace*, in the disillusionment and contempt Prince Andrei feels for the urban society life that he has married into, as well as Pierre Bezukhov’s decadent partying (based on Tolstoy’s own experiences as spoiled young nobleman), and his disastrous subsequent marriage to the social butterfly Helene Kuragin.

**Tolstoy’s Critique of Romanticism**

The European Romantic Tradition

1. The European Romantic tradition, often referred to as Romanticism, gained dominance in philosophy and literature around the turn on the nineteenth century (at exactly the same time that the action of War and Peace occurs), celebrated the inspirational power of nature. The natural world gains value unto itself. Painters begin to paint landscapes; poets like Wordsworth promote its therapeutic value. Instead of just studying and manipulating the natural world scientifically, we should interact with nature intuitively, using our emotions to learn from it directly.

2. Human emotions provide a common denominator for asserting the worth and fundamental equality of all people. Each person’s feelings are intrinsically valuable; a child or a "noble savage" can teach more sophisticated, civilized persons about how to live more harmoniously because children and tribal people are "close to nature."
3. The celebration of youthful emotional extremes becomes fashionable through the works the English Romantic poets, all of whom either died young or produced their best work before the age of thirty-five. Youthful extremes of behavior are thus justified as “finding oneself” and demonstrating “individuality.” Society thus needs to be tolerant of individuals, allowing non-conformity and restless adventure as “personal growth.”

4. This romantic focus on individualism encouraged the rise of the "cult of personality." Some people demonstrate special talent and sensitivity, which make them worthy of heroic stature, immune to traditional social and cultural limitations. Poets like Byron and military leaders like Napoleon become "great men" not subject to normal moral codes.

Tolstoy’s Critical Response to Romanticism

1. Tolstoy did agree with the Romantic focus on the value and worth of the natural world. (See Romantic characteristics 1. and 2. above.) Life in the country, close to nature and in harmony with natural processes, has more worth than frivolous society. In addition, Tolstoy puts great emphasis on natural description as “mood setting” device in his narrative. Prince Andrei’s vision of the sky and the profound spiritual insight that it evokes in him as he lies wounded after the first major battle scene will be a very powerful example of Tolstoy’s ability to infuse nature with emotional power.

2. Tolstoy rejected, however, what he felt were the more emotionally self-indulgent tendencies of Romanticism. (See characteristics 3. and 4. above.) In War and Peace, youthful Romantic love is portrayed as a childish fantasy through the infatuations and the naïve romantic promises of Natasha Rostov and her brother Nikolai. Later on, both young people will suffer embarrassment and shame because of their “romantic” notions of love. From Tolstoy’s perspective, the passionate, youthful love celebrated by Romanticism is too tied to driven, irrational desires to be the basis for long-term relationships like marriage.

When he wrote War and Peace, Tolstoy identified Napoleon as the archetype of the false promise of individualism and “heroism.” 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 aristocratic leaders, but because the Russian people had the patience and endurance to outwait and outwit the French army.