

“Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*”, HUMS255
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“Old enough to drink? The Rostov children and states of intoxicated consciousness”

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Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* is a work peppered with loss. The characters lose devastating sums of money, loved ones, and even entire cities. Less tangible is the loss experienced by some of the younger characters in the novel, specifically the two eldest Rostov children, Nikolai and Natasha. In vivid scenes of heightened emotion in which the Rostov children experience states of intoxicated consciousness, Tolstoy guides the reader through pivotal moments in their lives. Nikolai is joyfully swept up in the emotional chaos of the battle at Ostrovna, only to be confronted with the harsh moral realities of war after striking an enemy soldier, an experience that leaves him “nauseated” (654). Natasha experiences a shift from reality into one of these states of altered consciousness, where, in a “state of inebriation” (562) from the flattering attention she receives from all the members of high society, she naïvely falls into the trap of the dangerous seducer Anatole Kuragin. These sudden maturations, in which Nikolai and Natasha respectively undergo moral and sexual awakenings, take them out of their childhood. This enormous transition to adulthood ultimately reveals more about the disturbing elements of the scenes than an adult perspective would, due to the novelty of experiences for children. Their novel perspective leads to the reader’s sense of defamiliarization as they are forced to reevaluate what had previously seemed normal and now seems absurd. In this essay I argue that, through

the Rostov children's transitions into or out of a state of intoxicated consciousness, Tolstoy exposes the pitfalls—the losses of identity, agency, and innocence—of the alluring social systems of the Napoleonic wars and St. Petersburg high society that cause these highly altered states in the first place.

In these states of intoxicated consciousness, Tolstoy removes the Rostov children of their identity, and in doing so he demonstrates how the intoxicating systems of war and high society bring people into collective experiences that reduce them to one of the masses. Nikolai is part of a squadron that moves together, “feeling the same” (653) as Nikolai, each a pawn in the larger “game of chess”. Although the reader is shown the scene through Nikolai's (arguably individual) perspective, the mass rush forward into battle and the groupthink reveals that, when swept up in high-stakes emotions of war, any sense of unique identity is lost. The moment Nikolai is taken out of the intoxicated consciousness—and when he gains his identity and individuality—is when he is faced with a scene of utter humanity. Watching the absurdity of the French soldier “hopping on the ground with one foot, the other being caught in the stirrup”, Nikolai's “animation suddenly vanished” (653). The fragility shown by the soldier forces Nikolai out of the intoxicated state, and this allows him the perspective to analyze what he is doing. This perspective prevents him from being one of the masses, and, individuality intact, he can make the decision to leave the soldier unharmed. Yet Tolstoy does not make this transition from the conforming child to morally capable adult simple. Nikolai is haunted by the encounter; he realizes, “He thought I'd kill him. Why should I kill him?” (655), a thought that echoes his experience in battle years before, in which he asks, “Why are they running...to kill me? *Me*, whom everybody loves so? (189), focusing on the importance of an individual life. In Nikolai's

confrontation with humanity and subsequent “unclear, confused feeling” (654), Tolstoy highlights how the value on individual lives is suppressed in the intoxicated state of battle.

While Nikolai gains his identity as he exits the altered state, Natasha loses her upon entering it. She feels “hundreds of eyes looking at her bare arms and neck” (558), admires the “very bared, white, full shoulders and neck” (559) of H el ene, and feels almost drugged by the “warm air” and “bright light” (561). The result of her vulnerability combined with the beauty of H el ene and the attention she is receiving causes Natasha, previously admired for her unique liveliness, to enter a state of intoxicated consciousness in which this previous identity is smothered. Copying H el ene, Natasha smiles “identically at everyone” (562) and speaks her first French of the novel, a symbol of artifice directly linked the upper class and exhibited by people like H el ene. Her uniqueness fades, and she becomes just like any one of the other St. Petersburg high society women. Natasha becomes an object, observed and objectified by all she encounters, so that she is “onstage” as much as the performers are. Tolstoy makes it clear that, upon entering this particular society with its intoxicating effects, any sense of individuality or reality is exchanged for the accepted artificial customs.

A more concerning effect of the war and high society upon the Rostovs is their blind obedience and loss of agency in the intoxicating systems. Tolstoy depicts them acting involuntarily, without understanding why they are acting the way they are, such that agency is removed and what happens is out of their hands. In Nikolai’s case, the intoxicating crowd psychology of war causes him to charge forward, “not thinking, not reflecting”, and Nikolai “[does] not know himself how and why he was doing it”. More ominous is the moment at which he, “not knowing why himself, raised his saber and struck the Frenchman with it” (653).

Following this unthinking action, the intoxication breaks, and Nikolai is consumed by feelings of confusion and guilt. Arguably, this confused feeling which “wrung his heart” (654) comes as a result of the fact that when he acted, it without control of his actions. This loss of agency, coupled with the sudden awakening out of the inebriated state that caused his thoughtless violence, ultimately is what plagues him after the event because he cannot comprehend why he did it. In sharing Nikolai’s internal state, Tolstoy reveals the negative effects of the loss of agency caused by the state of intoxication the soldiers enter into.

It could be argued that Tolstoy is also revealing the necessity of the blind obedience in of war. The intoxication in the battle scenes often translates as the characters feeling “cheered” and “roused” (652) by the noises of gunfire, noises that ought to instill panic but instead enhance bravery. It seems the lack of reflection or choice is the only way to get the soldiers to commit this kind of violence. It is indeed possible that Tolstoy recognizes the necessity of intoxicated states for the defense of Russia. However, the fact that Nikolai is “ashamed” of his actions suggests it is wrong that the nature of the battle and expectations of the soldiers is such that they aren’t given a choice as to their actions that could permanently affect them and their way of thinking.

Natasha’s loss of agency has no argument in its favor; it leads her into a dangerous situation and prevents her from recognizing Anatole’s dark intent. The state of intoxicated consciousness stems heavily from the “admiring, tender gaze” (562) Anatole gives her, and Shinshin gossips that “Anatole Kuragin [has] driven all our ladies out of their minds” (559). Indeed, Tolstoy depicts Natasha as utterly without agency, arguably “out of her mind”. She “involuntarily intercepted his glance” (565) and “involuntarily followed him with her eyes” (566), the repetition of the word “involuntary” accentuating her lack of control over the situation

where “she did not remember who she was and where she was and what was happening before her” (561). The dramatic irony, of the reader being able to witness Natasha’s state of intoxicated consciousness where she loses all sense of power when they already are aware of Anatole’s reputation, heightens the sense of danger in the scene. Although Anatole’s more forward actions occur in later scenes, this scene is pivotal in that it lures Natasha into that state of intoxication in which she loses agency and is therefore easier to manipulate. Tolstoy demonstrates through this how the artificial behavior of the St. Petersburg society has successfully seduced the inexperienced Natasha, and how as a result she finds herself in “frightening” situations in which she has no agency.

These particular scenes of transition suggest that significant portions of the book can fall into the bildungsroman genre. It is significant that Tolstoy chooses to show the negative facets of these systems through the perspective of children, as the sheer novelty of experience of a child leaving childhood provides an added layer of *ostranenie*. The defamiliarization happens only outside the intoxicated consciousness because inside it, there is no room for perspective or analysis. Natasha’s coming of age is traced through her changing opinion of the socially accepted opera. Initially, she finds the opera “wild and astonishing” because, as a child, this is her first opera. The reader therefore experiences the opera through the lens of a child, and the defamiliarization for the reader is extreme. No clear scene appears, just “painted cardboard and strangely dressed-up men and women”, and Natasha finds it all “pretentiously false and unnatural” (561) while everyone around her has accepted the silly social scenario. Yet as she succumbs to the influence of the society and enters the “state of inebriation”, she “no longer [finds] it strange” (564). As she leaves childhood and enters the intoxicating society, Tolstoy has

the estrangement falls away and Natasha accepts what she sees without question. Had Tolstoy given us the experience of an adult in society, accustomed to seeing artificial performance, they would not have undergone such a stark transformation and the reader would not understand the true dangers of the effects of the society.

Similarly, Nikolai's experience in the battle is more poignant because it wrenches him out of childhood. While charging in battle, he does not reflect on his actions, but when he looks into the enemy's face, he sees "not an enemy's face, but a most simple, homelike face" (653), dissolving his idea of what an enemy "should" look like. Once he breaks out of the intoxicated consciousness, he realizes the enemy is a human being and that same sense of estrangement settles over the reader as Nikolai watches the soldier clumsily struggle to flee, causing the reader to reconsider how war pits humans against each other. In this moment of moral decision-making outside of the automatic actions of intoxicated consciousness, Tolstoy forces Nikolai to grow up extremely quickly and face the moral realities of war. An adult character likely would have had a more realistic understanding of who he was facing, and the reader would have been deprived of the moral pain Nikolai experiences when he is forced to mature in the face of his own decisions.

The loss of innocence in Nikolai and Natasha's maturations also support the argument that sections of *War and Peace* make it a bildungsroman. There are unquestionable parallels between the hunt scene and this battle scene, with Nikolai racing into battle "with the feeling with which he raced to intercept a wolf" (653). Yet a crucial difference lies in his emotions once he has captured his prey. The moment Nikolai captures the wolf is the "happiest moment of his life" (501), a hyperbolic sentiment that reveals his oblivious, competitive youth. Yet in the battle scene when he wounds the soldier, his fantasy shatters, and Nikolai spends the rest of his day

“silent, pensive, and concentrated” (654). The change in response to what is essentially the same situation reveals how this moment has taken Nikolai out of his childhood and out of the fantasies that protected him, and his actions plague him. Tolstoy, in forcing Nikolai to face the moral consequences of his actions, removes him of the innocence that concealed guilt or worry, and this occurs as a result of his exiting the state of intoxicated consciousness.

Natasha’s loss of innocence is all the more tragic due to Tolstoy’s careful emphasis on her naïveté. Due to Natasha’s inexperience, “it never entered her head that there was anything bad in [Anatole’s actions]” (563). One could argue that Natasha was aware of what she was doing, and indeed she does “[feel] that she was doing something indecent in speaking with him” (565). Yet to put the blame on her would be truly unjust. This is Natasha’s first experience with high society, and, more importantly, is her sexual awakening. She is unable to forget the moment when Anatole “pressed her arm above the wrist” and recognizes that the “former purity of her love” (567) for Andrei is gone. Her purity is further tainted by the “hundreds of eyes” that objectify her and by Anatole’s gaze that breaks the “barrier of modesty” (565) she expects to protect her. Though almost nothing happens in the scene, Tolstoy removes her innocence through this sexual awakening inside the inebriating St. Petersburg social scene, and in doing so he critiques the dangerous and consuming nature of that society.

Though Nikolai and Natasha’s experiences are incredibly different, the children leave the situations feeling disturbed. Nikolai leaves with an “unpleasant, unclear feeling [that] nauseated him morally” (654), while to Natasha, everything “seemed dark, unclear, and frightening” (566). Nikolai’s exit from childhood coincides with the exit from the intoxicated consciousness while Natasha’s maturation happens as she enters that state, yet the transition leaves them confused and

distressed. In depicting these somewhat violent breaks from childhood through the losses of identity, agency, and innocence, Tolstoy reveals how the seductive and intoxicating scenes of the battle and the St. Petersburg society at the opera are ultimately destructive.