

All Shall Be Well: Anatole's Elevating Love

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When Anatole seduces Natasha in Book Eight of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, he fractures several columns integral to her life. To the other characters, his influence seems purely pernicious. Despite initially damaging her engagement, familial relations, and sanity, Anatole ultimately straightens Natasha's trajectory. Her character undergoes unprecedented growth, developing a conscience and finding true love. Though sinister if viewed in isolation, Anatole's romance benefits Natasha in the grand scheme of the narrative. From this analysis we may draw larger conclusions that speak to Tolstoy's philosophy of life, namely that while men often do not comprehend the crises at hand, events work out happily for them in the end, at least from an outside perspective.

Upon his entrance into her life, Anatole immediately confuses Natasha. After their improperly friendly introduction in the theater, she "sat for a long time hiding her flushed face in her hands trying to realize what had happened to her, but was unable either to understand what had happened or what she felt. Everything seemed dark, obscure, and terrible" (Tolstoy 503). He muddles her thoughts, overcomes her will, and ultimately wins her as his betrothed. When her relatives intervene and avert disaster, the consequences of his temptation linger. She yells, "I hate you, I hate you! You're my enemy forever!" at her dearest friend, Sonya, and betrays the trust of her entire family (Tolstoy 515). She loses the love of Prince Andrew and sullies her reputation throughout the town. Most dramatically, she sinks into despair and attempts to poison herself. These events bring Natasha quite low, and she appears unfortunate

to all observers. Anatole is banished from the city as a scoundrel, and Natasha is left to gather the shards of her life.

At this point, Pierre steps in to help reassemble Natasha. He puts the past behind her, counsels that her whole life remains before her, and then, confesses his devotion. Natasha breaks down in “tears of gratitude,” and begins the healing process (Tolstoy 533). It took Anatole’s violent presence for Pierre to realize his love; furthermore, Anatole’s wickedness removed the obstacle of Prince Andrew and set Pierre and Natasha’s lives on compatible trajectories. In the end, theirs is the happiest of romances. Natasha bursts out, “I love you awfully! . . . Awfully, awfully!” amidst one of their conversations, while they talk “as only a husband and wife can talk, that is, with extraordinary clearness and rapidity, understanding and expressing each other’s thoughts in ways contrary to all rules of logic, without premises, deductions, or conclusions, and in a quite peculiar way” (Tolstoy 1040, 1039). This interpersonal bliss was made possible only by Anatole’s destructive interference in Natasha’s earlier life.

In addition to finding true love, Natasha matures personally following the adventure with Anatole. First, she is seized by a feeling “new to her” at Mass one afternoon, that “of humility before something great and incomprehensible” (Tolstoy 585). She incorporates this feeling into her prayers, recognizes and rejects the sin of pride, and gives herself to faith and the direction of God, “whom she felt guiding her soul” (Tolstoy 586). She then experiences another feeling new to her: hope. The “sense of the possibility for a new, clean life, and of happiness” replaces her former despair (Tolstoy 586). Next she is struck with horror at her sin and vileness, glimpsing for the first time a wider view of the society she inhabits, in which each individual cruelly judges others and is judged in turn (Tolstoy 587). This feeling she again

relinquishes to God, and it is replaced by joy in the Lord and hunger for righteousness. “[T]each me what I should do, how to live my life, how I may grow good forever, forever!” she pleads in prayer (Tolstoy 587). Natasha’s final new emotion is the experience of full guilt in the wrongs she committed against her family (Tolstoy 588). She prays for them and for her enemies in a sincere prayer of repentance. Through this tumultuous spiritual growth, Natasha transforms from a willful, self-absorbed girl into a humble, compassionate young lady. She develops a conscience and a sense of personal responsibility as a result of the crimes perpetrated by Anatole.

Natasha’s example provides a case study of Tolstoy’s larger philosophy of life. While most characters throughout the narrative face trial after trial with pain and confusion, ultimately events shape them and their destinies favorably. Though each incident’s final purpose is veiled from the characters’ understanding as they suffer through it, they emerge as more fully developed human beings. Nicholas overcomes first-battle jitters to become a military leader and role model. Mary prayerfully endures paternal abuse and heartache, only to develop into the sort of tender domestic creature who is irresistible to Nicholas. Pierre traverses several philosophical crises, the peaks and troughs of society, marriage to a wicked woman, and imprisonment, eventually finding peace and happiness in simple human relationships. He seeks tranquility “in philanthropy, in Freemasonry, in the dissipations of town life . . .” (Tolstoy 895). Then “without thinking about it,” he finds “peace and inner harmony only through the horror of death through privation, and through what he recognized in Karataev” (Tolstoy 895). Prince Andrew marries inadvisably, grows disillusioned with life and then Natasha, only to find a meaning higher than all else upon his deathbed. Examined independently and with a temporally

limited perspective, these characters' trials are senseless and cruel. Seen teleologically, however, the obstacles in their lives strengthen their minds and hearts, allowing for peace in the end. Notably, this perspective is only available to the reader who is outside the story's events. It is not for the characters to know that they must in some ways be broken before they can be healed.

Characters such as Petya and Helena, who meet an untimely or disreputable demise, challenge a reading of Tolstoy's life philosophy as akin to Julian of Norwich's "all shall be well." Considering the lessons deduced from the above examples, however, one may understand Tolstoy as encouraging the same faith on the part of the reader as is required on the part of the characters. The characters are unable to see how present difficulties will bear fruit; likewise, some hardships in *War and Peace* are beyond the reader's comprehension.

One of Pierre's crises of faith mirrors aspects of the current perplexity facing the reader. His "faith in the right ordering of the universe, in humanity, in his own soul, and in God, had been destroyed . . . When similar doubts had assailed him before, they had been the result of his own wrongdoing" (Tolstoy 856). Pierre faces the problem of theodicy in its entirety—the problem of evil not only attributable to his own free will, but also existing on a larger scale, far beyond his, or perhaps any individual's, power to produce or to combat. Whereas before he could seek relief from troubles in hopes of self-improvement, atrocities of the present magnitude are beyond Pierre's ability to rectify or even to understand. It seemed "that the universe had crumbled before his eyes and only meaningless ruins remained" (Tolstoy 856). Similarly, the reader is willing to tolerate trials when the possibility of benevolent outcomes is clear, but when problems remain unresolved, beyond the scope of the novel's completion, the

reader wants to join Pierre in nihilistic despair.

Tolstoy's overarching philosophy may in fact be hope and faith in the face of apparently senseless evil. By guiding readers to several characters' ultimately happy endings, with glimpses of their confusion along the way, and by leaving some situations unresolved, he allows the reader room to exercise faith similar to that required of the characters. Perhaps Prince Andrew's deathbed revelations offer transcendent guidance in grappling with this mystery. Prince Andrew, who is at the moment of his passing "indifferent, because something else, much more important, had been revealed to him," sees the simplicity of everything, and the senselessness of anxiety (Tolstoy 866). "The fowls of the air sow not, neither do they reap, yet your Father feedeth them," he wishes to say, but refrains in sympathy for the unenlightened (Tolstoy 867). Prince Andrew sees death, the final evil, as "an awakening," and one "particle of love returning to the general and eternal source," God (Tolstoy 871, 870). Though certain episodes appear evil, meaningless, and hopeless within the text and even at its conclusion, Tolstoy intimates that we should have hope in a loving plan beyond our present perspective.

Work Cited

Tolstoy, Leo. *War and Peace*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1996. Print.