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War and Peace

Leo Tolstoy · *1865–1869 · Louise and Aylmer Maude translation*

Across Napoleon's wars with Russia, from 1805 to 1812 and after, Tolstoy follows a few families: the restless seeker Pierre, the proud Prince Andrew, and the lively Rostóvs, above all Natásha. Battles, fires and captivity strip away vanity until each finds, or misses, what makes a life good.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What is true greatness: the conqueror's will, or a simple, good and truthful life?

"And there is no greatness where simplicity, goodness, and truth are absent."

The narrator, on Napoleon · Book Fourteen, ch. XVIII

Napoleon's glory shrinks before the lofty sky; Kutúzov's patience, Karatáev's humility, Princess Mary's faith and Pierre's hard-won peace are the novel's real greatness.

KEY CHARACTERS

Pierre Bezúkhov
the seeker who learns humility

Prince Andrew Bolkónski
pride, then forgiveness

Natásha Rostóva
life, fault and repentance

Princess Mary
patient, prayerful faith

Nicholas Rostóv
honest, ordinary duty

Platón Karatáev
simple, cheerful holiness

Kutúzov
patience and humility in command

Napoleon
vanity mistaken for greatness

Hélène & Anatole Kurágin
beauty without virtue

PIERRE'S DREAM IN CAPTIVITY

> *"To love life is to love God. Harder and more blessed than all else is to love this life in one's sufferings, in innocent sufferings."*
>
> **A voice in Pierre's dream** · Book Fourteen, ch. XV

> *"Patience and time are my warriors, my champions"*
>
> **Kutúzov, to himself** · Book Thirteen, ch. XVII

Grades 10–12

Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01 Society and Battle

BOOKS ONE–THREE (1805)

Vanity in the drawing room, glory sought on the field.

- **Pierre Bezúkhov**, an awkward illegitimate son, inherits a vast fortune and marries the beautiful, faithless **Hélène**
- **Prince Andrew Bolkónski** leaves his pregnant wife for the war, hungry for glory
- The warm, chaotic **Rostóvs** of Moscow; young **Natásha** and her brother **Nicholas**
- At Austerlitz Andrew falls wounded and sees the lofty sky; his hero Napoleon seems small

> *"All is vanity, all falsehood, except that infinite sky."*
>
> **Prince Andrew, wounded at Austerlitz** · Book Three, ch. XVI

02 Seeking a Way

BOOKS FOUR–SEVEN (1806–1811)

Grief, ideals and a second chance at love.

- Andrew comes home just as his wife dies in childbirth
- Pierre fights a duel, separates from Hélène, and joins the Freemasons
- Pierre urges a despairing Andrew that life has meaning
- Andrew falls in love with Natásha; his father insists they wait a year to marry

03 Temptation

BOOKS EIGHT–NINE (1811–1812)

A broken promise, and a long road back.

- Waiting for Andrew, Natásha is infatuated with the rake **Anatole Kurágin**
- Their elopement is stopped; Andrew breaks the engagement
- Pierre, who loves her, treats her with gentle respect
- Ill with shame, Natásha slowly recovers through prayer at church

04 1812

BOOKS NINE–TEN

Invasion, and the hardest battle.

- Napoleon invades Russia; Andrew's stern old father dies
- At Borodino Pierre wanders the battlefield among the soldiers
- Andrew is mortally wounded
- In the field hospital he sees Anatole's leg amputated, and forgives him

> *"Compassion, love of our brothers, for those who love us and for those who hate us, love of our enemies"*
>
> **Prince Andrew, wounded at Borodino** · Book Ten, ch. XXXVII

05 Moscow Burns

BOOKS ELEVEN–THIRTEEN

Losing everything, finding what matters.

- **Kutúzov** gives up Moscow without a battle, and the city burns
- Natásha has the family's carts unloaded for the wounded — and finds Andrew among them
- She nurses him; he dies forgiven and at peace
- Pierre stays to kill Napoleon, saves a child from the fire, and is taken prisoner
- In captivity he meets the peasant soldier **Platón Karatáev**

> *"Love hinders death. Love is life."*
>
> **Prince Andrew, near death** · Book Twelve, ch. XVI

06 Deliverance

BOOKS FOURTEEN–FIFTEEN & FIRST EPILOGUE

New life after the storm.

- The French retreat; Karatáev, too weak to march, is shot
- Partisans free Pierre; young Pétya Rostóv is killed
- Pierre, free within, and Natásha, grieving, find each other
- Pierre marries Natásha; Nicholas marries Princess Mary
- The Epilogue shows two families, imperfect and alive with love

> *"We imagine that when we are thrown out of our usual ruts all is lost, but it is only then that what is new and good begins."*
>
> **Pierre to Natásha and Mary** · Book Fifteen, ch. XVII

True Greatness · Providence & History · Forgiveness · Suffering & Joy · Family · Simplicity

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 10–12

1. Follow the sky over Austerlitz. When does Andrew remember it, and what does it mean to him each time?
2. Compare Napoleon and Kutúzov. Who acts, who waits, and which does Tolstoy call great?
3. Watch Pierre's many searches (wealth, marriage, Freemasonry, a plan to kill Napoleon). What finally gives him peace?
4. Natásha falls and repents. How do the people around her respond, and who shows mercy?
5. Notice where faith appears in quiet people: Princess Mary, Karatáev, soldiers before Borodino.
6. The history essays argue that no single will steers events. Ask how that fits with a Providence that does.

Quotations are verbatim from the Louise and Aylmer Maude translation, Project Gutenberg #2600, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/tolstoy-war-and-peace/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.