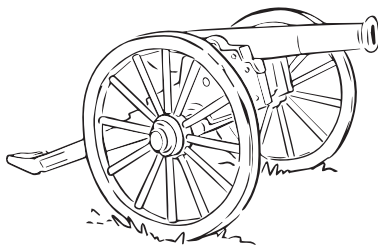


WORLDVIEW GUIDE

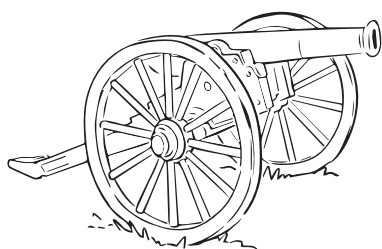
WAR AND PEACE



Samuel Dickison

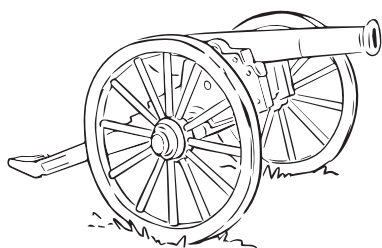
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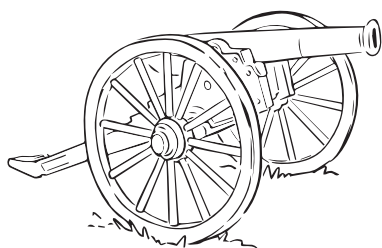
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INTRODUCTION

There is a shelf load of great books whose mere size places them in a special category. These are the heavy hitters; slap some mortar between them and you have a respectable fortress. Of course, size by itself is no indication of greatness, but at the very least it communicates “the commitment the writer shouldered in order to create the work, the commitment [a reader] must make to digest it.”¹ Leo Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* is perhaps the most formidable of these books. But the most impressive thing about Tolstoy’s magnum opus is that over three hundred and sixty-three chapters and well over half a million words he not only crafts a compelling story, but presents a view of life deeper and more vivid than many authors ever dream of.

1. Stephen King, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (New York: Scribner, 2000), 135.



WORLDVIEW ANALYSIS

Two questions lie at the heart of *War and Peace*. The first is an old one and well-worn: is man really free? Are we really, as William Henley wrote, the captains of our fate and the masters of our souls? Tolstoy answers this question with a story, but it is a story into which the author himself frequently comes to muse alongside his characters. In this way he is both author and character, historian and subject; paradoxes that ultimately tie in to the answer he presents.

The second question, and one that is closely related, has to do with man's relationship to time. How is it that finite man can be aware of, and even interact with, the infinite? In wrestling with this question Tolstoy is in good company. Solomon himself, in Ecclesiastes, writes, "He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end" (Eccl. 3:11). Man is, as Job says, "of few days and full of trouble. He comes

forth like a flower and fades away” (Job 14:1-2). Yet there is something in us that is built to last forever. T. S. Eliot gets at the same paradox in his poem *Little Gidding* when he writes, “Here, the intersection of the timeless moment / Is England and nowhere. Never and always.” And then later: “A people without history / Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern / Of timeless moments. So, while the light fails / On a winter’s afternoon, in a secluded chapel / History is now and England.”¹²

Together these two questions drive the narrative of *War and Peace*. Can man act of his own free will, and is there a part of him that transcends his own time?

Tolstoy’s answers to these questions are both very simple and very complicated. (As Pierre says, “. . . ideas that have great results are always simple ones.”) To the question of man’s finitude, Tolstoy answers, Yes; man is part of something greater. To the question of man’s free will, Tolstoy answers, No; men are not free, at least in the sense that we normally mean. He explains that, in the same way that humanity once had to come to terms with a heliocentric solar system, despite the apparent contradiction to our eyes, “it is necessary to renounce a freedom that does not exist, and to recognize a dependence of which we are not conscious” (p. 1308). Tolstoy’s answer is complicated in that, to make sense of such a counterintuitive (and, to

12. T. S. Eliot, *The Collected Poems and Plays, 1909–1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1952) 138, 144–145.