
THE HUNT FOR TRUTH IN WAR AND PEACE

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Tolstoy's War and Peace overflows with seemingly unconnected, intricate details. Despite this fact, one cannot deny the uncanny sense of unity that leads the reader through the novel. Slonim calls this unity the "string that makes of the beads a necklace." He goes on to say that "what is really important and makes the necklace priceless is the value of each bead." One 'bead' that is particularly alluring is the hunt scene in which Tolstoy expresses many of the main ideas of the novel.

Most noticeable in the hunt sequence is the back-to-nature ideal that Tolstoy was so fond of despite his aristocratic upbringing. The hunt starts out from the Rostovs' land at Otradnoe on a beautiful September day when the land is full of change and color. Their destination is the "unbeaten oak grove" where a litter of young wolves has made a home.¹ A kind of natural law beyond communication replaces the social law that operates within the fences of the Rostovs' land as the hunters move out for the hunt. Tolstoy describes the scene as hunters move away from society towards the forest: "Every dog knew its master and its call. Every man in the hunt knew his business, his place, and what he had to do. As soon as they passed the fence, they all spread out evenly and quietly, without noise or talk, along the field and road leading to the Otradnoe forest" (599). Tolstoy emphasizes this point of unity even further when he writes of the huntsman's call, referring to it as the "halloo that unites the deepest bass with the highest tenor" (597). The images employed in the preparation for the hunt for the "big wolf," in which everyone senses that they are united in a common cause, put the scene on a large, ominous scale--as if they are going after a creature on the order of Moby Dick. In fact, when reading about Danilo, the huntsman, and his helper, Uvarka, I could not help but think of Queequeg, the exotic harpooner in Moby Dick. These names alone conjure up images of the stark beauty found in nature that is evident in the hunt for the wolf.

Tolstoy emphasizes the importance of the hunt, this "communion with Mother Nature," by giving Nikolai "the happiest moment of his life" (606) as he chases after the wolf. Tolstoy's description of Nikolai's experience has obvious references linking it to Andrei's "finest moments" and to Natasha's feelings of extreme peace and happiness that

¹Leo Tolstoy, War and Peace, trans. Ann Dunnigan (New York: New American Library, 1968), p. 596. Further references will be indicated in the text.

occur earlier in the novel. The same grand sky that gave the wounded Andrei a humbling look at the true nature of things as he lay sprawled on the battlefield appears repeatedly in the chapters describing the hunt. The image of the misty "sky melting and sinking to the earth without a breath of wind" (596) hints to the reader that something similar to what happened to Andrei on the battlefield and on the raft with Pierre is soon going to happen to Nikolai. The same is true of Nikolai's perception of the "scraggy oaks rising above the aspen undergrowth, at the eroded brink of the ravine" (604) just prior to coming face to face with the wolf. This image reminds the reader of the interaction between Andrei and the old oak that calls to mind all his best moments in life (508).

As Nikolai pursues the wolf, Tolstoy points out that he "did not hear his own cry nor did he realize that he was galloping; he saw neither the dogs nor the ground over which he rode. He saw nothing but the wolf" (605). This bears remarkable resemblance to the description of Natasha at the ball in which "she noticed nothing, saw nothing of what interested everyone else" (557) and "all blended into the shimmering procession" (552). Through such parallel scenes, Tolstoy prepares the reader for Nikolai's unfiltered glimpse at reality and truth that give him the same sense of happiness experienced by both Andrei and Natasha at their moments of epiphany.

However, this experience of 'natural truth' disappears as the object of the hunt is diminished from the wolf to the fox and finally to the rabbit. This decay is marked by the intrusion of insignificant societal rules on the hunters and their natural freedom. We move from a hunt for the wolf, portrayed as a natural affirmation of life with a truth and grandeur all its own, to a hunt for a rabbit full of trifling competitiveness. The sense of purpose that united everyone and wiped out all social distinctions in the first hunt is weakened in the chase for the fox and disappears entirely in the ensuing rabbit hunt. This last case reduces the whole affair to a mere social game in which the hunters show off their dogs and compete for the rabbit.

Such competition is impossible in the first hunt because there are no real distinctions between the hunters. Danilo, the servant, freely chastises the Count, the master, for letting the wolf escape. This is possible because according to the unprejudiced rules of nature, Danilo is the Count's equal, if not his superior. Tolstoy even describes the old Count as "a baby taken out for a drive" (601) which compares unfavorably to the description he gives of Danilo. Distinctions also vanish between the animals and their owners, as they seem to take on characteristics of each other. The Count's horse "was turning gray like himself" and Chekmar's dogs "had grown fat like their master and horse" (601). Everything appears to be on the same level in the absence of society's distinctions, a situation which prevails throughout the wolf hunt. Notice how the "rush of the hounds" suddenly interrupts the Count's and Semyon's conversation just as it was turning to a topic of society (602). At the end of the wolf hunt, however, society reasserts its rules: Count Rostov remembers how he was

criticized, and in turn, chastises Danilo for his action. Danilo's only reaction is the same "shy, amiable, childlike smile" (606) that the Count had earlier given Danilo.

Tolstoy illustrates the contrast between the wolf hunt and the two later hunts even further by his selection of colors and images. Everything in the wolf hunt is gray and old. Danilo is a "gray, wrinkled man"; Karai is a "shaggy, ugly old hound" with a "matted tail"; Nastaya Ivanovna is an "old gray-bearded man"; the wolf is "old...with a gray back." This imagery serves several purposes for Tolstoy. First of all, it emphasizes once again the idea of natural unity discussed above. No distinctions may be made--everything is painted in shades of gray. Secondly, these images give the scene a distinguished aura. The hunt for the wolf is naturally noble and seems to be linked with a sense of time.

Next to these images of grandeur, the fox and rabbit chases seem ridiculous. Details that were insignificant before come into play in these hunts like the varying colors of the dogs (black, white, tan, mouse-colored) and the outfits of the hunters (red caps). Although the scenes are more colorful now and the predominant color has switched from gray to red, they are less lively. Tolstoy comes right out and says that "everything was done slowly and deliberately" in the rabbit hunt (612). It is quite clear why Nikolai's sighting of the "queer, short-legged red fox with a bushy tail" doesn't come close to invoking the same feeling he experienced when looking into the wolf's eyes.

The ridiculous nature of the later hunts shows through even beyond these images. Everything about these two hunts seems so reckless, and undignified compared to the natural flow of the wolf hunt. There's the quarrel over the fox because Ilagin apparently breaks the rules by chasing a fox scared up by Rostov's group. And then the rabbit hunt has everyone chasing aimlessly after the darting rabbit. This lack of control is not seen in the wolf hunt where everything unfolds naturally. Part of the reason for this is that the hunters do not try to impose their own control on the wolf hunt. They accept their roles and adjust to the changing conditions of the event. In the later hunts, however, the hunters foolishly believe they have control over their dogs as they compete for the fox and rabbit. As Tolstoy demonstrates in his battlefield scenes, it is foolish to impose yourself or society's rules on the nature of things.

This discussion of the hunt scenes would not be complete without mention of "Uncle," the rustic, but noble character Tolstoy introduces in these pages. "Uncle" is tied closely to nature and lives simply in a wooden house with unplastered walls covered with animal skins. When he isn't hunting, his days are spent in his overgrown garden. Plenty of opportunities arose for him to leave such a life behind, but he always returned. He was elected to public posts several times but he turned these down to remain at his country home. He did serve a brief stint in the army, but soon realized that he couldn't "make head nor tail of it" (617), and returned to hunting which he understood quite

well. It is quite evident that he is at peace with the ways of nature that are so much clearer to him than the ways of society. Rostov sums up "Uncle's" character well when he says, "He really is a harmonious fellow" (621)!

"Fair field, clear course" is this character's favorite saying and reflects his appreciation of the simplicity and straightforwardness found in nature. He rarely says anything without injecting this phrase in the middle of his sentence. "Death must come--fair field, clear course--and nothing will remain," he says, "so why sin?" (617) For many, such an argument would be in favor of sin because no consequences would be incurred if there is nothing after death. But for "Uncle," true sin--not the right and wrong decided by society, but that decided by nature--would be a contradiction to his nature as a human being. His advice to Natasha also sheds light on his character. In the beginning of the hunt, he tells her not to fall off her horse "or--fair field, clear course--you'll have nothing to hold onto" (600). He lives in the immediate practical world, and does not cling to any false theories of life. The horse underneath him is real, and consequently, this is the only thing he relies on during the hunt.

The importance of this character is hinted at further by including him in the description of the oaks that Nikolai sees immediately before his moment of revelation. Tolstoy writes: "Rostov cast intent...glances over the thicket at the edge of the forest with the two scraggy oaks...at the eroded brink of the ravine, and 'Uncle's' cap just visible behind a bush on the right" (604). "Uncle's" presence at such a moment suggests that he is no ordinary character, but almost an embodiment of Nature. The fact that he is given no other name other than "Uncle," and always in quotations, gives the reader the impression that he is only called this for lack of a better term. He is not really a relative of the Rostovs by society's standards. He is something more and is related to more. But what this 'something more' is, Tolstoy is unable to identify--he can only acknowledge its presence. "Uncle" is a mysterious, universal relative related to and accepted by all. His housekeeper's attitude says it all: "Here I am! I am she! Now do you understand 'Uncle'?" To which Rostov answers, "How could one help understanding?" (616).

In light of all of this, we see that the hunt is essentially an affirmation and acceptance of life in all its natural simplicity and mystery. At the end of their excursion, Natasha is so affected by all that has happened and by her stay with "Uncle" that she has another moment of extreme happiness. It is at this moment that her "childlike, receptive soul that so eagerly caught and assimilated all the diverse impressions of life" (621) has another glimpse at truth. As the horses "splash through the unseen mud" of life, she realizes that only "God knows where we are going in this darkness," in the "wet, velvety darkness" that surrounds our human lives. Tolstoy implies that acceptance of this fact of nature will ultimately allow us to be successful on our own wolf hunts and to attain happiness.