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**Compassion - Leo Tolstoy's Philosophy as Seen in His  
*War and Peace***

**Olive Thambi, M.A., MPhil., Ph.D.**

# Compassion - Leo Tolstoy's Philosophy as Seen in His *War and Peace*

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## A Special Place in Indian Hearts

Leo Tolstoy has a special place in the hearts of Indians who read literature with a purpose driven heart. Gandhi's interaction with Tolstoy makes Tolstoy very dear to Indian readers. Tolstoy's spirituality and Gandhi's approach to political problems faced by Indians and humanity around the world cemented them forever as co-workers for peace, love and understanding.

Gandhi wrote from Johannesburg on 4<sup>th</sup> April 1910 a stirring appeal to Leo Tolstoy seeking his criticism of Gandhi's pamphlet written originally in Gujarati. He also mentions that he got Tolstoy's "A Letter to a Hindu" published and "translated into one of the Indian dialects." In that letter Gandhi wrote:

You will remember that I wrote to you from London, where I stayed in passing. As your very devoted adherent I send you together with this letter, a little book I have compiled in which I have translated my own writings from Gujarati. It is worth noting that the Indian government confiscated the original. For that reason I hastened to publish the translation. I am afraid of burdening you, but if your health permits and you have time to look through the book I need not say how much I shall value your criticism of it. At the same time I am sending you a few copies of your 'Letter to a Hindu' which you allowed me to publish. It has also been translated into one of the Indian dialects.  
([http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist\\_Archives/bright/tolstoy/lettertogandhi.html](http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist_Archives/bright/tolstoy/lettertogandhi.html))

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Gandhi calls himself a very devoted adherent of Tolstoy. And Tolstoy wrote a letter to Gandhi, with a very significant observation relating to re-birth (*samsara*) and immortality of soul:

As regards 're-birth' I for my part should not omit anything, for I think that faith in a re-birth will never restrain mankind as much as faith in the immortality of the soul and in divine truth and love. But I leave it to you to omit it if you wish to. I shall be very glad to assist your edition. The translation and diffusion of my writings in Indian dialects can only be a pleasure to me.

[http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist\\_Archives/bright/tolstoy/lettertogandhi.html](http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist_Archives/bright/tolstoy/lettertogandhi.html)

With such close contacts with Gandhi and India, it is no wonder that Tolstoy continues to be very popular among Indian readers of world literature.

My goal in presenting this paper is to review the life of Tolstoy and relate it to some of his novels and short stories.

### **Family Setting**

In *War and Peace*, everything happens within the framework of a family. Compassion, love and understanding are the keys to a vibrant and a healthy relationship. Leo Tolstoy has brought out these qualities subtly through settings and portrayal of characters in *War and Peace*.

Family is described to be a place of refuge and also a place where views are exchanged and beliefs passed on. The experiences of characters in Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* are variegated and unique. The characters themselves speak volumes about the humane approach to the common things of life. Tolstoy has analyzed the characters, threadbare with a finesse which was perhaps unsurpassed in his times.

### **The Strife and Bickering of Everyday Life**

Tolstoy's *War and Peace* is set against a backdrop of the Napoleonic invasion but it is more about the strife and bickering of everyday life than the actual war itself. Tolstoy uses the backdrop of a historical war to suggest the everyday battles against an illness, a nagging problem, a seemingly insurmountable situation, etc. The novel is an appeal for compassion and love in a world where people are apparently too busy to give a thought to compassion.

### **Evolution of Characters**

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The characters evolve gradually as the theme develops. No character in the novel *War and Peace* can be judged in the beginning. The different traits of the characters are disclosed at different points of time to different people. There are characters who express frustration and anger with some of the characters while with the rest they are very amiable and compassionate. So, one cannot make up one's mind about a character by just observing one of his moods. The novel *War and Peace* offers scope for the entire personality of each character to be disclosed in stages.

For instance, Pierre Bezukov in *War and Peace* is seen as a very arrogant man in the beginning when he interacts with the conceited Anna Pavlovna who is the affluent hostess of a ball. But, later, as the story unfolds, Pierre's true nature is revealed when he converses with his close friends and also other people of his social standing. Later, Pierre is also seen to interact casually with the peasants as well.

Natasha Rostova who is seen as an impulsive, vulnerable young lady is also seen as a person who is capable of deep remorse and regret. In fact, her faith in a mighty God is obvious only when she feels betrayed by the people around her. Ultimately, her consistent prayer life sees her through all the vicissitudes of life.

Prince Andrew is seen as an icon, who could fascinate anyone with his debonair style and looks. The recognition accorded to him gives him an inflated opinion of himself. However, at a later stage, his finer side is revealed when he realizes that fame is short lived. His transition from a worldly to a spiritual life is marked by phases of inner turmoil and perplexity. His evolution as a refined character is another instance of the fact that human beings are subject to change and that one facet of a person's character need not sum up his entire personality.

Princess Mary who is portrayed as docile, quiet and obsequious turns out to be a woman of great strength and fortitude. Beneath the apparent fragile frame is a heart which is ablaze for God. Her faith in a loving and an understanding God, gives her the much needed solace.

### **The Functions of Characters – Use of Symbols**

The characters serve as touch points for the author to develop the theme and give it a shape. A novel without characters would seem lifeless. In fact, the characters created by the author, Leo Tolstoy are so real and life-like that one can identify oneself closely with some of them. It is all about the reader himself - his various moods, his reactions to it and his ability to overcome hurdles in life. Besides, characterization, Tolstoy uses symbols to drive home his point.

### **Dual (Conflicting) Functions of Symbols**

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Table is a symbol which serves as a platform to voice opinions. It is a place of confrontation – where people can look each other in the eye and face reality head on. It is also a place where pleasantries are exchanged and jokes shared. It is place where people congregate for food and find themselves in a state of relaxed togetherness. Table is place where characters in Leo Tolstoy’s novel, *War and Peace*, exchange views and pass on opinions in balls and other get-togethers.

However, there are instances wherein table can also become a platform for bias and resentment. For instance, Pierre, who was actually the son of the wealthiest Count in Russian was “not accorded a welcome in keeping with his status”. On the other hand, later in the story, Natasha’s presence in the story makes everyone congregate to different tables, just to hear her sing. The rhythm of life slows down for a moment. If used profitably, table is a platform for strengthening bonds. In fact this is rather overtly expressed on many occasions during the course of the novel.

### **Role of Music**

Music becomes a symbol for the expression of thoughts. Natasha’s sweet melodies enthrall people both old and young alike. As they listen to Natasha, they feel themselves mellowing to a soft and tender rhythm of life. Prince Andrew may have been a tough commander on the war front but the musical notes in Natasha remind him of love, compassion and tenderness which was amiss in his life. Music, in Tolstoy’s view, reached out to people more than words. Tolstoy himself loved gipsy music because it touched and changed lives, crude as it was. Incidentally, it is music which transforms Prince Andrew into a soft-spoken man on the battle-field, who could look at even his enemies with genuine compassion and love.

### **Imagery**

Imagery is another symbol that allows a person to gradually get in touch with the strengths and inner resources that have been hidden. The only thing for imagery to be successful is for one to become still and calm and then patient so that gradually the fog lifts to reveal what has always been there, but was simply hidden. In *War and Peace*, the protagonist Pierre finds solace and happiness in the country side. Imagery is a powerful tool to help a person create harmony and wholeness in his life.

The hoary frost and the scenic beauty of the countryside reflect the serenity and sobriety of values. This breathtaking scenery appeals to Pierre Bezhukhov as he catches a glimpse of the scene through the prison windows. Nature invites him to take a closer look at the creations of the world and leads him to ponder about the creator of the entire universe itself. Having realized that the entire universe is within the grasp of God, he senses that God is in control of his life. He just had to place implicit trust in a mighty God who was mindful of him.

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This feeling is reflected in Prince Andrew as well but through a different metaphor. Prince Andrew sees the gnarled and venerable forest oak, which he thought was blasted and dead, has again put out tender young leaves to mingle indistinguishably with the quivering canopy of green in yet another spring.

Edward Crankshaw in his book, *The Making of the Novelist*, says, Prince Andrew is transported by this revelation and stirred to believe that after life, after all, still holds something for him. He goes on to say that he makes the readers see the colour and wonder of the physical world in an inimitable style far transcending even human comprehension and awareness.

### **Conflict of Good and Evil**

Tolstoy mostly dealt with the conflict of good and evil. He devised ways and means of introducing both the aspects rather subtly in his novels. In *War and Peace*, he introduces God's folks, who are a saintly group of people. These people led nomadic lives and they manage to eke out a living through their melodious music. They were a great source of comfort to Princess Mary in her years of loneliness and rejection. The evil aspect of life is symbolized by Princess Mary's father, Bolkonsky who is bent on hurting her verbally. Ultimately, it is the good which triumphs. Princess Mary settles down to a peaceful life with Nicholas.

### **A Closer Look at Human Nature**

Tolstoy had a unique technique of taking a closer look at human nature with a penetrating gaze which confounded most people of his times. He seems to suggest that human relationship itself is built on mutual trust and understanding. People gain the trust of their fellowmen through their daily interactions and behaviour. If there is no pleasant communication among people in a society, resentment and bitterness begin to fester and eventually hurt feelings. This happens when there is absence of love in the formative years which require periodic nurturing and care.

### **Passing on Impressions to Others**

Just as actors give meaning to themselves, to others through their roles, people pass on impressions to others as they interact with their fellowmen. Again, the actor may be unaware of his performance but people attribute traits to them. People are judged by the kind of interactions they have with others.

In the novel, *War and Peace*, balls and other get-togethers serve as platforms to voice people's opinion. These get-togethers bring out the real person behind the façade in the interactions. The words they speak and the views they share bring out their hidden traits.

For example in the novel, *War and Peace*, Anna Pavlovna who is the hostess of the party, voices the opinion that she does not accord the same welcome to all the guests. Her very haughty look suggests it all. Pierre too reveals his pride in his very conversation with

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Abbie Morris when he claims to know more about Russia's history than anyone else. Again, the ostentatious lifestyle of the Vasili family is reflected in the exchanges the family has during balls.

### **Seamless Blending of Spiritual Aspects**

Leo Tolstoy was, perhaps unrivalled, in his ability to blend the spiritual aspects, rather seamlessly into the novel, *War and Peace*. Tolstoy believed that one's inner life was much more important than the outer life. People have to be sensitive to their fellowmen's needs. He demonstrated through his novels that there can be nothing more satisfying and fulfilling than reaching out to others and lending a helping hand.

Princess Mary in *War and Peace* is a self-effacing character who gave herself over to the poor and downtrodden. Pierre in *War and Peace* risked his own life to save Natasha's honour. Levin, in *Anna Karenina*, was sensitive to the needs of the poor peasants.

### **Prayer – A Medium of Responses from God**

Prayer has always been a hallmark of saints, down the ages. Tolstoy extols the Lord Jesus as a person who was constantly praying to God. Jesus taught his disciples to pray and consequently they were sensitive to God's voice. It is, in fact, the praying people who make it a matter of conscience. The presence of God is secured and retained by prayer.

Sometimes people are so devastated by their emotions that they cannot pray. God can discern the hearts of people who cannot articulate their feelings into prayer. In Tolstoy's view, God makes his voice known in the answers He gives the praying people.

Objects in the environment are used to add dimensions to prayers and responses. In Tolstoy's opinion, there are different ways in which God's voice echoes throughout the entire universe. God can speak through people, nature or even inanimate objects.

For example, Princess Mary's faith-filled words to her brother Prince Andrew as he left for the war represented God's voice. Initially, Prince Andrew did not grasp the implication behind Princess Mary's exhortation to pray and receive answers from God. Later in the battlefield amid the entire din and the chaos, his sister's words crossed his mind and it was as if God was urging him to pray and Prince Andrew prayed and derived comfort and peace.

Even the inanimate icon of the Lord Jesus which was presented to Prince Andrew by Princess Mary spoke of God's supreme sacrifice and love for him. Pierre felt God reach out to him rather tangibly when he just viewed His creations. He could not help marveling at the green fields, misty meadows and the dew drops on the grass, right from

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his prison windows. Tolstoy asked, "Can it be possible that in the midst of this entrancing Nature, feelings of hatred, vengeance, or the desire to exterminate their fellows can endure in the souls of men?" (1024).

### **Families in Tolstoy's Stories**

Families in Tolstoy's novels are an integral part of the story. In *War and Peace*, the Rostovs are a closely knit family. No other family in the novel is as cohesive, vibrant and loving as this family. The members of the family cared for each other in different ways. They extended genuine love even to their acquaintances and friends. A point in case is Prince Andrew, an acquaintance of theirs, who was given love and care after the loss of his wife, Lise. In order to help Prince Andrew get over his remorse, the entire family took him along during their trip to the countryside.

Merry-making and a sense of togetherness was what made the Rostov family stand out in a crowd. They did not allow themselves to feel sad. Neither did they allow anyone else to feel remorse or regret over a past happening. People like Prince Andrew who associated with this family also became like them. Their laughter was contagious and their concern for people was genuine. There could never be a home as cozy, warm and inviting as theirs.

Natasha loved her brothers Nicholas and Petya immensely. Her deep devotion to them is seen especially in scenes where Nicholas had to part in order to be on the warfront and where Petya is undecided whether to join his brother in the army or not. Then when Nicholas is away, the pangs of separation felt by the family and their yearning to see him well and alive is worth mentioning. The family is bound together by cords of love. When people try to open their hearts to one another and seek to love and serve one another in their own strength and wisdom, they end up exhibiting undesirable traits which are evidenced by emotional entanglements.

### **To Make the World a Better Place to Live In!**

Through his writings, Tolstoy always wanted to make the world a better place to live in. His writings influenced readers across the world. In fact, many Russian leaders were greatly inspired by his novels. Obviously, the Napoleonic invasion had left behind a trail of traumatic experiences and haunting memories. In the hands of Tolstoy, the Napoleonic war of 1812 was transformed into the epic story of *War and Peace*. The novel showcases a whole range of emotions in its variegated forms.

Tolstoy was a peasant, count, prophet and nothing short of phenomenon. His most intriguing story, *War and Peace* was his own. Having had first hand information about the war, as a soldier, he was able to present the ugly truths about war in its varied dimensions. Each episode in the novel captured a different perspective about life. The

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mindlessness of the carnage in the battlefield tormented Tolstoy's mind and he gave vent to his inner feelings through *War and Peace*.

In the novel, Tolstoy was creating a podium for himself in order to voice the silent cries of humanity, as he sensed these cries. His canvas encompassed all levels of characters ranging from aristocratic class to the peasant class. He wrote about their desires, dreams and hopes of a better tomorrow. *War and Peace*, which had then been a long awaited story in Russia was published in serial form. Each episode enthralled the readers and piqued their curiosity to know more. Finally, when the novel appeared in its entirety, the readers were overwhelmed by its depth and exposition.

The novel celebrates everything ever achieved- wealth, fame and goodwill of men. It still continues to inspire, confound and intimidate people around the world.

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