

# THE CONCEPTS OF "SELFISHNESS" AND "DEGRADATION" IN THE FIGURATIVE SYSTEM OF THE NOVEL (USING THE EXAMPLE OF THE KURAGIN FAMILY)

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## Abstract

This article discusses issues related to the interpretation of the concept of "selfishness" and the issues raised by Leo Tolstoy in this area. The issues of the formation of the worldview of the famous writer are considered, as well as the evolution of the worldview of the great writer in this matter, which eventually led Tolstoy to create images reflecting a certain philosophical position of the author himself.

**Keywords:** non-resistance, tenets of Christianity, love against evil, biblical truths, evolution of consciousness, denial of some canons of Christianity, excommunication, salvation through forgiveness

## Introduction

One of the most significant figures in the plot of the novel "War and Peace" is the second son of Vasily Kuragin—Anatol. Draws attention to the fact that the very sound of the name has a French sound, apparently separating it from the "Russian" world.

Anatole looks very much like his sister. Unlike Hippolytus, Anatole has a bright appearance, is handsome, and knows how to speak gallantly. These are the external manifestations of his personality. His inner world is characterized by a selfish attitude to life and hypocrisy inherent in his entire family, bordering on outright arrogance and unscrupulousness.

Anatole is used to taking everything from life that brings pleasure and enjoyment. His turbulent adventures, dubious connections and entertainment do not bother his parents, brother and sister at all. It is not for nothing that the closest friend and drinking companion of the young Kuragin is Fyodor Dolokhov, who, arranging endless carousals and parties, attracts the young comrade so much.

Moreover, Helen, who is no different from her brother in her inner nature, indulges him in his depravity. Knowing how the acquaintance of Anatol and Natasha Rostova can end, she introduces Anatol to the trusting and inexperienced Natasha with undisguised vicious pleasure. The result is an attempt to escape Rostova from home in the absence of her father, and the breakup of the engagement of Natasha and Prince Andrew.

Anatol Kuragin, according to Tolstoy's plan, was created as the antipode of Bolkonsky, so one of the conflicts of this storyline occurs precisely between them. Natasha's escape attempt from her parents' home is perceived by Prince Andrey as a personal insult inflicted on him by Anatol Kuragin. Andrey Bolkonsky, contrary to expectations, does not challenge Kuragin Jr. to a duel,



but seeks a meeting with him. Tolstoy thus creates a contrast between Bolkonsky's nobility, which consists in the fact that Andrey did not want to cast a shadow on Natasha with his challenge, and Kuragin's dishonorable baseness and cowardice, who avoided meeting Bolkonsky, realizing that he was looking for an opportunity to find a new reason for a duel.

The result of such a life, in which a person lives solely for the sake of lowly pleasures and entertainment, which lead the lives of others to a dramatic, and sometimes even to a tragic outcome, is one— after the Battle of Borodino, Anatol Kuragin loses his legs, and soon dies from his wounds.

Using the example of Helen and Anatol Kuragin, Tolstoy shows that because of the inability to empathize with others, lack of concern for others and unbridled depravity, a person is deprived of the opportunity to improve spiritually and develop, such a person is deprived of the future, why in the classical literature of the XIX century, the authors of works often "killed" their heroes (Bazarov "Fathers and Sons", Belikov "The Man in the case", Nastasya Filippovna "The Idiot", etc.).

One of the most interesting supporting characters is the owner of a social salon, Anna Pavlovna Scherer. At the beginning of the novel, Anna Pavlovna seems to be a positive character who shows in the heat of argument her patriotic feelings and dislike for the enemies of her country. However, it soon becomes clear that Anna Scherer, being the owner of a secular salon, had to adhere to the topics of conversation that were supported among the salon's visitors and express the point of view that the secular public expressed.

Anna Scherer is undoubtedly presented in the novel as a type of two-faced hypocrite who, for the sake of the prosperity of her salon, is ready to adapt to any guest, creating a comfortable environment for the same hypocritical and deceitful guests.

Anna Scherer's duplicity can be projected onto the mores that reigned in secular society and, accordingly, Madame Scherer's social salon— the Petersburg society itself.

The atmosphere of the salon created by Anna Scherer, built and operating according to its own unspoken rules, is a kind of projection on the entire secular Petersburg, where grandees like Kuragin, whose purpose is to find an opportunity to arrange their son in the embassy, the diplomat Bilibin, for whom Kuragin is in the salon, the soul of the company is Viscount Mortemard, whom Anna Scherer invited to the salon, in order to make their establishment more important ("... the Viscount was presented to society in the most elegant and favorable light for him, like roast beef on a hot dish, sprinkled with herbs..."<sup>1</sup>) and Countess Drubetskaya and her son were always welcome guests. From the group of Anna Pavlovna's guests, two characters stand out in contrast: Andrey Bolkonsky and Pierre Bezukhov.

Prince Andrew often expresses thoughts that many do not agree with, but being an honorary visitor to the salon, he does not experience condemnation or misunderstanding on the part of others and the owner of the salon herself.

Anna Scherer shows a different attitude towards Pierre Bezukhov. At the beginning of the novel, the young count, the illegitimate son of the old count Kirill Bezukhov, looks like an outsider in the company of Anna Pavlovna's guests, and there is clearly a noticeable disdain for him, especially on the part of the hostess of the salon. At the beginning of the novel, it is not yet known whether the illegitimate offspring of an influential nobleman will be able to inherit a huge fortune,

<sup>1</sup> War and Peace. Volume 1. Part one. Chapter III



which is disputed by Vasily Kuragin, so for the St. Petersburg world, Peter Kirillovich is just a bastard who has nothing behind him that will put him on a par with the rest of society.

The salon society of Madame Scherer, despite the fact that it mainly consists of representatives of the Russian nobility, has nothing to do with the Russian world. In this sense, it is worth referring to the episode where Ippolit Kuragin tells an absolutely not funny anecdote. Before that, Ippolit warns that it is necessary to tell it in Russian ("Excuse me, Viscount, I will tell it in Russian: otherwise all the salt of the joke<sup>2</sup> will be lost"). Having started telling a joke, Hippolyte, with his usual aplomb, deliberately distorting the Russian speech, tries to portray a Frenchman speaking broken Russian. A short episode in which Leo Tolstoy portrayed the customs and tastes of the capital's society, which on the eve of the war with Napoleon's France blindly worships the French standards of secular life, shows how much the Russian world rejects or ridicules its Russian identity, depriving itself of the opportunity to say what Pierre will later say about Platon Karataev: "All of them were then presented to Pierre as if in a fog, but Platon Karataev remained forever in Pierre's soul the strongest and dearest memory and the personification of everything Russian, kind and round."<sup>3</sup>

"I-concept" allows Tolstoy to consider and create a multi-faceted picture of Russian society at that time. This concerns, first of all, the typological component, where Tolstoy creates the brightest types, one way or another, revealing the essence of the concepts that we are considering.

One of these types is the hussar Zherkov. The cornet is one of the closest associates in Kutuzov's retinue, in which he did not stay long. Friendship with Dolokhov was stormy and fun, it seemed that Zherkov is a loyal friend, not capable of betrayal. However, after Dolokhov was demoted to a soldier, the young hussar began to avoid Dolokhov and avoid meeting him. After Kutuzov promised to restore Fyodor Dolokhov to the rank of officer, Zherkov again begins to show signs of true friendship. The duplicity of this character is obvious.

Selfishness and egocentric attitude to life manifested themselves, of course, were fully revealed during the Battle of Schoengraben. Having received an order from Bagration, Zherkov rode to fulfill the order, but, having come under shelling, turned to a safe place, pretending, at the same time, to actively search for his superiors. As a result, the regiments were dispersed, many Hussars, including Nikolai Rostov, were seriously wounded, many were killed.

In the epic novel, according to genre specifics, Leo Tolstoy assigns separate storylines to two historical figures-Mikhail Kutuzov and Napoleon Bonaparte. To consider the concept of "egoism" and its connection with the "I-concept", we should separately consider the events related to the figure of the French emperor.

Napoleon is one of the greatest historical figures who left his mark in world history. This figure is often compared to Alexander the Great and Caesar, due to his great victories and historical transformations. Having conquered the whole of Europe, Bonaparte nevertheless had a large number of his supporters, who, despite his plans of conquest in relation to their countries, felt awe and admiration for him.

Among his admirers are many of his famous contemporaries Byron, Stendhal, Lermontov and, among others, A. P. Pushkin, who dedicated to him the poem "Napoleon" ("The wonderful lot

<sup>2</sup> War and Peace. Volume 1 Part 1 Chapter IV

<sup>3</sup> L. N. Tolstoy. War and Peace. Volume IV. Part I. Chapter XIII



was fulfilled..."), paying tribute to his great deeds:  
 May the faint-hearted one be overshadowed with shame  
 , who this day  
 Insanely stirs  
 up His debunked shadow with reproach!  
 Praise! ... He is for the Russian people  
 The high draw indicated  
 And eternal freedom to the world  
 From the darkness of exile bequeathed.<sup>4</sup>

But no less representatives of European progressive thought considered Bonaparte the greatest oppressor and enslaver of the free peoples of Europe.

One of his most ardent opponents is Leo Tolstoy, who expressed his negative attitude towards Bonaparte in the novel "War and Peace" and described the attitude of supporters and opponents to his personality through his main characters. We can see the author's own attitude to Napoleon at the time of Napoleon's reception of General Balashev: "He was in a blue uniform, open over a white vest that fell over a round stomach, in white leggings that hugged the fat thighs of his short legs, and in boots. His short hair had evidently just been combed, but one lock of it hung down over the middle of his broad forehead."<sup>5</sup>

Also, this scene gives us an idea of Napoleon, and as a person egocentric and embodying the content of the category "I" in its entirety: "It was clear that only what was happening in his soul was of interest to him. Everything that was outside of him did not matter to him, because everything in the world, as it seemed to him, depended only on his will."<sup>6</sup>

In the image of Napoleon, selfishness and individualism are vividly depicted, the word "I" is often used by him, and he attributes all the achievements of the imperial army exclusively to himself: "It was obvious that only what was going on in his soul was of interest to him. Everything that was outside of him did not matter to him, because everything in the world, as it seemed to him, depended only on his will."<sup>7</sup>

Napoleon and Kutuzov are two historical antipodes. In the novel, Tolstoy very clearly emphasizes their antagonistic views on the conduct of war, their attitude towards their soldiers, and their life orientations.

Napoleon treats his soldiers like pawns on a chessboard, and enjoys watching his soldiers die, believing that there is no war without victims. But, it is worth noting that Napoleon was loved by his soldiers, and they are ready to go into battle at any time for the sake of their emperor. It was all about the enormous talent of populism that Bonaparte had made his weapon in winning the hearts of the vast masses, ever since his consulate in the French Republic. Another reason was his ambitious plans to conquer the whole world, which always generates fanaticism among the common population.

The scene of Napoleon's flight from Russia across the Berezina River is another episode that shows the extreme degree of his selfishness. The emperor, with his staff and a small retinue, is

<sup>4</sup> A. S. Pushkin. Napoleon ("A wonderful lot has been made...") Date of writing: 1821 Source: Russian Virtual Library.

<sup>5</sup> L. N. Tolstoy. War and Peace. Volume three. Part One

<sup>6</sup> In the same place

<sup>7</sup> In the same place



known to abandon the remnants of his army of many thousands, which is suffering heavy losses due to Russian frosts and constant raids by Cossack regiments, to the mercy of fate and flees to France. One of the concomitant features of the egoist man is the envy that Napoleon shows when he says about the Cossacks: "If I had Cossacks — I would conquer the whole world..."<sup>8</sup>. In a hundred years, an Argot dictionary will be published in France, in which the French will give the Cossackm such a definition: "Scratch a Russian — and you 'll find a Cossack, scratch a Cossack and you'll find a bear"<sup>9</sup>. In this quote, it is necessary to pay attention to the obvious disregard and attempt to convince the European philistine of the wild nature of the Russian people, hidden under European external manifestations. This dictum, according to some historians, belongs to Bonaparte, which clearly expresses the idea of individual exclusivity and the superiority of one nation over another, which in modern political science is called "racism".

In history, such an attitude to Kievan Rus and the Moscow Kingdom has been demonstrated before. In 1227, Pope Honorius sent a letter to the Russian princes saying: "accept the legate of the Roman Church, so that under the influence of his sound instructions you will comprehend the truth of the Catholic faith, without which no one will be saved..." "All of you, "the Pope wrote," we earnestly ask, exhort and implore that this desire of yours be communicated to us in letters and through reliable ambassadors." This letter was written before the planning of the Fifth Crusade, against the Muslims and the Russian principalities. The death of Pope Honorius two months later did not allow the campaign to take place, however, attempts to make Russia Catholic, as well as the rejection of the Orthodox worldview did not stop. Following Honorius, Pope Innocent IV suggested that Alexander Nevsky follow the example of his father Yaroslav and convert to Catholicism along with his people. In exchange, the Pope offered an alliance and military aid against the Mongol-Tatar khan.

Alexander Nevsky gives a brief but profound spiritual answer to this suggestion: "We will not accept any teaching from you!".

The union with the European knightly states did not take place, but Prince Alexander entered into an alliance with the Mongol-Tatar khan. Thus, Nevsky preferred the partial loss of independence to spiritual treason, which, in the context of the "we-concept", is one of the first events that lead to an understanding of the conciliar unity of the Russian people in the face of external aggression and alien spiritual temptations.

It was the clash of the individualism of European and Orthodox conciliar existence, as a consequence-the European rejection of the Orthodox worldview and the centuries-old unwillingness of Orthodox Christians to recognize Catholicism or Protestant faith as true, that caused numerous invasions of Russian land and wars of extermination, including the Napoleonic campaign of 1812.

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<sup>8</sup> Napoleon I Bonaparte. A source: <https://ru.citaty.net/avtory/napoleon-i-bonapart/>

<sup>9</sup> In the same place





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