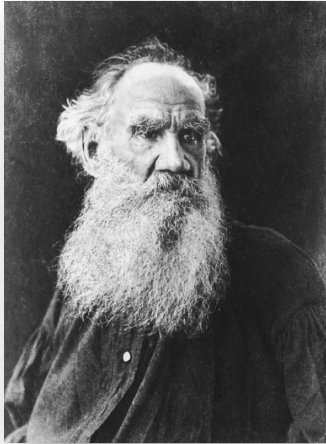


WAR AND PEACE AND FREEMASONRY

John W. Bizzack, PM, FPS, BF, Master of William O. Ware Lodge of Research

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Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) was a renowned Russian author, philosopher, and social thinker, widely regarded as one of the greatest writers in history.

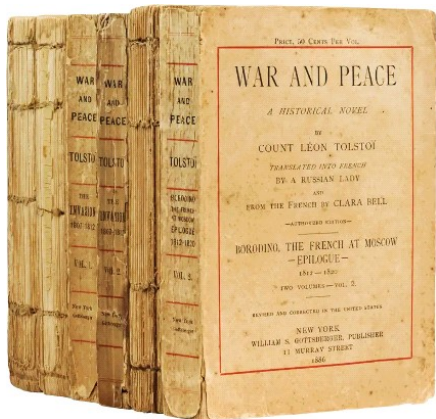


Although Leo Tolstoy's works, such as *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, are still taught in higher education and specialized literature courses, their inclusion in general curricula can vary. Several factors might contribute to why his works are less emphasized in some educational systems today.

His writing is lengthy, complex, and intricate. Some school systems believe local or contemporary literature makes lessons more relatable to students. There is a language barrier because his work is originally in Russian, although reliable English translations have been available since 1889.¹ The significant transformation of education systems in the United States since the 1960s to what is considered modern curricula, has reduced the focus on classical literature. Despite these factors, Tolstoy's themes of morality, human structure, and reflection on history

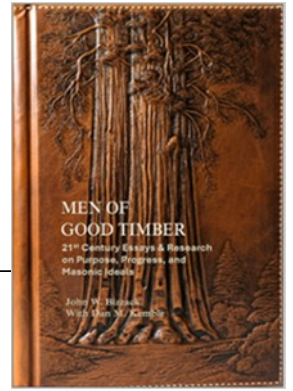
remain timeless.

Tolstoy devoted nearly a decade to research, which included about six years to the writing and revisions of *War and Peace*. He began working on the novel in 1863 and, after several rewrites, completed it in 1869.²



Set during the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815), the novel explores the lives of several Russian families against the backdrop of societal upheaval and war with themes spanning war, love, family, and the search for personal meaning. At its core, the story intertwines the lives of these families, their dynamics, multiple subplots, personal growth, political intrigue, and philosophical explanations.

One of the more intriguing episodes in the novel is Pierre Bezukhov's initiation into the Freemasonry.



This paper appears with forty-eight other Masonic writings and reviews in
Men of Good Timber

¹ *War and Peace*, Thomas Y. Crowell, New York 1889, is the first authorized American edition and first edition translated from the Russian by Nathan Haskell Dole, who also contributes a three-page preface.

² Charles Moser, *Encyclopedia of Russian Literature*. Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Tolstoy examines the complex interplay between individual transformation, societal purpose, and the gap between principles and reality through Pierre's Masonic experience.

There is no historical evidence to substantiate claims that Tolstoy was initiated into the Masonic Fraternity. The assumption that he was a Mason likely stems from his skill as a writer to depict the vivid, compelling, and persuasive narratives about Pierre's initiation and observations of the Fraternity during his active Masonic journey. In fact, a long-overlooked 1866 letter from Tolstoy to his wife while he was researching at the Rumyantsev Museum in St. Petersburg, tells us of his view of Russian Masonry. From it, one cannot draw the conclusion that he was a Mason.³

Count Pyotr "Pierre" Kirillovich Bezukhova is not the central character in *War and Peace*, but he is a focal point of the novel. His personal growth and philosophical struggles mirror the novel's broader themes of identity, destiny, and the search for a meaningful life.

Pierre is a young aristocrat disillusioned with his seemingly meaningless life of privilege and decadence who eagerly seeks purpose. Fueled by a desire for transformation and clarity, his yearning makes him particularly receptive to Freemasonry, which he views as an avenue toward moral and spiritual rebirth. Tolstoy portrays the Masonic initiation process in a theatrical ritual, rich with symbolism and gravitas.

Pierre's disillusionment with certain aspects of the organization illustrates how lofty ideals alone are insufficient without concrete, actionable change.

Pierre experiences a mix of emotions during his initiation. At first he is skeptical about the ceremony. The rituals and enigmatic speeches seem theatrical and almost absurd to him. But as the ritual unfolds, he becomes increasingly captivated by the central philosophical ideals professed by the Fraternity, such as brotherhood, moral duty, and self-improvement and he is instilled with a profound sense of belonging and hope and his desire to live a life permeated with higher purpose after the moral failures and existential confusion he faced in his earlier life. His ongoing struggle to reconcile the lofty ideals of Freemasonry with the coarse realities of the world ultimately create tension as he continues to search for truth and meaning.

Pierre becomes highly active in his St. Petersburg lodge and finds himself dissatisfied. He does not think of doubling Freemasonry itself, but suspects that Russian Masonry has taken a wrong path and deviated from its original principles. And so, toward the end of the year, he goes abroad to be initiated into the higher secrets of the order. Pierre's disillusionment with certain aspects of the organization illustrates how lofty ideals alone are insufficient without concrete, actionable change.

In members of his and other Lodges, Pierre finds men that he knew in ordinary life, and he finds it difficult to regard them merely as Brothers in Freemasonry. Under the Masonic aprons, insignia, and regalia, he sees the uniforms and decorations for which they strived in ordinary life

³ Graeme Love, "Leo Tolstoy And Freemasonry," Holden Research Circle, Chips of the Chisel, Melbourne, Australia, <https://www.oocities.org/hrcsec/tolstoy.html>, accessed August 2024.

and is struck for the first time by the endless variety of men's minds, which prevents a truth from ever presenting itself identically to two persons.⁴ Tolstoy seems to use Pierre's experience to mirror his personal view in discovering the applied and surface aspects of the Masonic lodge noting that it seems like more of a "social institution."⁵

Pierre questions the actual impact on shaping individuals or society through Freemasonry and implies that for certain members, the Fraternity is driven more by the allure of status and ceremony than by a sincere dedication to moral principles. In fact, Peirre believes that for the more recent members of the brotherhood, Freemasonry is little more than an opportunity for networking. He characterizes members of the St. Petersburg Lodge where he was initiated as consisting specifically of four categories of members: those absorbed in the science of Masonry, those who hope for direction and purpose through Masonry, those who adhere to the rules of the lodge, and those who join out of personal ambition.

True growth, Tolstoy suggests, comes not from adherence to rigid frameworks but from personal introspection, authentic relationships, and a rational engagement with the world.

Tolstoy illustrates through Pierre that true growth and fulfillment stem not from strict adherence to rigid frameworks, but from personal introspection, genuine relationships, and thoughtful engagement with the world. Pierre ultimately realizes that simply being inducted into the Fraternity does not inherently make one a true Freemason, highlighting the distinction between superficial membership and deeper, self-driven transformation.

Pierre's storyline is rich with events, tragedies, and revelations that eventually shape his character. By the end of the novel, he emerges as a more grounded and self-assured person. He marries and finds emotional depth and later engages in meaningful societal and political work that channels his beliefs into action that reflect his personal growth. But he continues to face challenges that test his convictions and inner strength and learns to adapt to a world filled with unforeseen trials and unpredictable forces. He learns there is no finish line in the labor of self-discovery if a man is to improve himself and symbolize the value of resilience and the importance of love and human connection to others no matter the chaos, unforeseen trials, and uncertainty that surround life.

Pierre's character becomes a profound metaphor for the human experience that expresses how genuine joy and purpose in life cannot be solely derived from external achievements like material possessions, societal status, or isolation. Instead, they require an intentional, ongoing effort to nurture our well-being by practicing self-reflection and making deliberate choices about how we wish to live. If this process came naturally to everyone, there would be no need for structures like Freemasonry or other frameworks that guide individuals toward self-improvement.

⁴ Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, book six, Oxford University Press, 2010.

⁵ IBID.

On a deeper level, Pierre's initiation into Freemasonry is more than just a pivotal plot point. It symbolizes the universal human quest for purpose, moral clarity, and a deeper understanding of existence. The ceremony offers Pierre a structured lens through which he can confront his spiritual uncertainties, temporarily anchoring him in a world filled with ambiguity. The Masonic experience accelerates his ongoing evolution, pushing him to question and refine his beliefs. Ultimately, Pierre's Masonic journey is not about fully embracing Freemasonry, but rather about his earnest attempt to find a way to chart a meaningful course in an ever-changing and complex world.

In due course, the reader is left to infer that Pierre's commitment and dedication to the ideals of personal growth and moral responsibility become his essential and consistent compass that guide him through the unpredictable trials and tribulations of his life, underscoring the enduring relevance of these values in shaping his character and decisions. While Masonry pushes him further in that direction, he finds that while Masons talk of problems and express such good deeds, they fail to study what *is* Freemasonry,⁶ which is one of the problems written about by many Masons, their leaders, and scholars since the 18th century.

Reading *War and Peace* is not the same as studying *War and Peace*, any more than looking out the window is synonymous with thinking. Nonetheless, profound insight into themes of personal growth, moral integrity, and the pursuit of greater truths aligned with Masonic ideals make a

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study worthwhile. And through the story of Pierre Bezukhov, we can see the value of striving for self-improvement and enlightenment amidst the challenges of life amidst the war and peace we encounter in our own lives.

To fully engage with the formidable structure of *War and Peace*—a novel divided into four volumes, each containing multiple parts, amounting to a total of 361 chapters and spanning between 1,200 to 1,500 pages depending on the edition and translation—requires the same key element central to the commitment and seriousness of purpose found in Masonry: time.

The vast scope of Tolstoy's masterpiece serves yet as another profound metaphor, illustrating that the pursuit of personal growth, much like the labor of engaging deeply with Freemasonry, is a continuous, unending endeavor. The sheer size and complexity of *War and Peace* reflect the

⁶ José Alfonso Correa-Cabrera, "Coping with a Disenchanted World: The Portrayal of Enlightenment in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*" Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Ciudad de México, México, *Literatura: teoría, historia, crítica*, vol. 27 núm. 1, 2025. Graeme Love, "Leo Tolstoy And Freemasonry," Holden Research Circle, Chips of the Chisel, Melbourne, Australia, <https://www.oocities.org/hrcsec/tolstoy.html>, accessed August 2024.

incredible depth and richness of its themes, characters, and ideas. Similarly, both the novel and Masonry challenge us to question our preconceptions, confront uncomfortable truths, and strive toward an elevated understanding of ourselves and the world around us.