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THE GROTESQUE AESTHETICS OF TOLSTOY'S *WAR AND PEACE*

This paper aims to analyze Tolstoy's *War and Peace* through the lens of grotesque aesthetics. The grotesque is a literary style that seeks to expose the underlying reality of things hitherto taken for granted through uncanny and unfamiliar images and language. In *War and Peace*, the grotesque effectively embodies Tolstoy's literary artistry. The oddity and horror evoked by the grotesque reveal the dark abyss within the human psyche or cast a moral judgment on spiritual corruption. More saliently, the unique characteristics of the grotesque in *War and Peace* reveal the gap between the truth of life as perceived by its protagonist Andrei and objective reality from an epistemological perspective. Andrei's revelations, in particular, are closely linked with grotesque motifs, such as physical disease, corpses, pests, and the Sphinx, suggesting that a consciousness fractured by extreme physical suffering can perceive a transcendent world beyond the reach of reason and gain a sense of a noumenal realm beyond the phenomenal world.

Keywords: Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, grotesque, the dark abyss, epistemology.

I. Grotesque and Tolstoy

The grotesque, a literary style that seeks to recreate reality from a new perspective, is epitomized in Kayser's *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* and Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*.¹ While Kayser defines the eerie, the macabre, and the inhuman as the essence of the grotesque world, Bakhtin identifies it as the

¹ The study of the grotesque, led by scholars in France (notably Hugo's Preface to Cromwell), England, and Germany during the 18th and 19th centuries, culminated with Kayser. Significant post-Kayser studies on the grotesque include *The Ludicrous Demon: Aspects of the Grotesque in German Post-Romantic Prose* (Jennings 1963), *The Grotesque in English Literature* (Clayborough 1965), *The Grotesque: A Study in Meanings* (Barasch 1971), *The Grotesque* (Thomson 1972), *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (Harpham 1982), *Fiction of the Modern Grotesque* (McElroy 1989), and *The Modern Satiric Grotesque and Its Traditions* (Clark 1991). For an overview of early German and French research on the grotesque, see Meindl (1987: 13–15).

subversive function of laughter. These contrasting perspectives reflect the different periods of Western culture they represent: Romanticism and Modernism versus the pre-Romantic Renaissance, respectively, contrasted by modern aesthetics and ancient carnivalesque. Their seemingly opposing views are reconciled by the inherently self-contradictory nature of the grotesque; Meindl (1987) says “the divergence between Kayser’s and Bakhtin’s concepts of the grotesque is *transcended* to a certain extent *by the grotesque itself* since its central characteristic, or effect, is *self-contradiction*” (Meindl 1987: 18, emphasis added). Kayser’s macabre suggests a bright hope for a new world beyond the estranged one, while Bakhtin’s concept of laughter embodies a destructive “darkness” that precedes a new birth (Bakhtin 1984: 21). These views on the grotesque are not mutually exclusive. For both, the grotesque exposes the contradictions and absurdities of reality through uncanny and unfamiliar images and language while also highlighting the gap between the perception of the conscious agent and actual phenomena from an epistemological perspective. For instance, Kayser defines the grotesque as an estranged world, asserting that its essential characteristic is the shudder and fear one feels when trust in the previously unquestioned world is revealed as an illusion. Thus, he identifies the core of the grotesque as a “fear of life rather than fear of death” (Kayser 1966: 185), suggesting that we consider the phenomenal reality unveiled by this fear. Bakhtin (1984: 21), meanwhile, highlights degradation as a distinctive feature of grotesque realism² that portrays both “upward” and “downward”, symbolizing heaven and earth. Earth is simultaneously the grave and the womb, embodying both death and renaissance. In grotesque realism, degradation is a destructive force that has the potential for renewal and rebirth. It does not cast an object into the void of nonexistence; instead, it hurls it into the fertile lower stratum, the zone of conception and new life.

Anxiety and fear stem from the recognition of an unknown other or suppressed reality, such as a corpse, a fragmented self, madness, or demonic elements, which gradually settles into consciousness once that other or reality is perceived to be hostile. However, the power of the grotesque as a literary allegory is its ability to expose the contradictions between “my perception” and “reality”, exposing the circumstances and reality of existence that are more terrifying than the unfamiliar other that caused the fear. Thomson (1972: 28) identifies macabre, absurdity, the distortion of nature, and demonic elements as key elements of grotesque aesthetics, arguing that these factors, intertwined with fear and anxiety, distort reality while simultaneously revealing the inherent truths within it. The unfamiliarity and fear evoked by the grotesque allow us to capture the dark abysses within human beings and the grotesque nature of existence while also revealing the conscious agent’s limitations from an epistemological perspective.

² Kokobobo states that grotesque realism shares properties of both the grotesque and realism in that “like the grotesque, it [realism] produces a warped portrayal of the world with a focus on the body and hybrid unshapeliness, while simultaneously retaining realism’s priorities by adhering to verisimilitude and never fully leaping into the supernatural” (Kokobobo 2018: 3).

To achieve this, the grotesque employs motifs such as monstrosities, madness (lunatics), dehumanization, death (corpses), ruins, dreams, nightmarish fantasies, supernatural phenomena, and the hybridity of animate and inanimate beings. In 19th-century Russian realist novels, these motifs were used to uncover the truths of life. For instance, Gogol, in *Diary of a Madman*, *The Nose*, *The Overcoat*, and *Dead Souls*, exposed the eerie reality that surpasses grotesque fantasies by using madness, nightmarish visions, and the hybridity between humans and objects or animals. Similarly, Dostoevsky, in *Bobok*, satirized the devious and decadent masses through the grotesque voices of the dead.³

However, the romantic motifs associated with supernatural elements, such as the walking nose or the voices of the dead, gradually fade out of Russian realist fiction; “The Russian realist grotesque is flattened of its supernatural components and either is redirected inward into a monstrous or vacuous psyche or assumes other quieter, metaphorical tones” (Kokobobo 2018: 13–14).⁴ According to Kokobobo, grotesque characters in Russian realist novels are primarily depicted as humans hybridized with animals, corpses, or objects. This rhetorical strategy effectively portrays the upper class, declining after the Great Reforms, as devoid of humanity.⁵ Matich (2005) critically examines the dismembered bodies depicted in Tolstoy’s works, suggesting that “Tolstoy engaged dissection and vivisection as a punitive measure or to create a gothic effect” (55). Prince Anatole Kuragin’s loss of a leg is interpreted as “symbolic castration” (38) in response to ethical depravity, while the depiction of Anna’s body as a dismembered corpse after an inappropriate relationship is analyzed as a metaphor for the consequences of violating God’s laws (43).

In Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, the grotesque is employed through human–animal or human–object hybrids and various other metaphors, but the novel still retains some remnants of Romantic motifs associated with the grotesque. These include madness (lunatics), demonic visions, death (corpses), pests (flies and cockroaches), humanized objects, objectified humans, and the metonymic imagination of fragmented bodies, and are used to expose the dark abysses within

³ Dostoevsky’s works are deeply infused with the inner conflicts of the multifaceted human soul; he drew upon these conflicts as the primary source of his literary expression. In *Crime and Punishment*, *The Demons*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*, he contrasted the grotesque desires born from physical corruption, reason, and rationality with a spiritual and pure world and explored the fundamental limitations and sufferings inherent in humanity, as well as the possibility of salvation.

⁴ Kayser (1966: 121–129) approached the grotesque primarily from an aesthetic perspective. He stated that the grotesque declined in the 19th century following the Romantic era, but noted that a significant shift from Romantic to realist grotesque occurred in Russian literature of this period, particularly in Gogol’s *Diary of a Madman*.

⁵ Ani Kokobobo interprets the grotesque in *Anna Karenina* as portraying Anna, who, having lost her spirituality and sense of self, becomes a human–animal hybrid due to her obsession with sexual pleasure. Nikolai’s decaying corpse reflects his loss of spiritual energy; here, Kokobobo sees a reminder of the dichotomy between soul and body, symbolizing the death of a spiritual being (Kokobobo 2018: 62–77). In *Resurrection*, the merchant’s corpse “serves as a metonymic reflection of the wider loss of spiritual identity in the novel” (Kokobobo 2018: 107).

human beings or to represent a moral judgment on spiritual depravity. For example, the lunatic on the Sokolniki field creates a terrifying, wild, and prophetic impression. The sacred terror inspired by the lunatic reveals the violence inherent in the masses, suggesting that Rastopchin's earthly crimes cannot escape the judgment of conscience.

The unique characteristic of the grotesque in *War and Peace* is its ability to reveal the conflict between the characters' beliefs about life and the reality they face through the lens of epistemological realization. The narrative technique that illustrates the work's core theme is that 'life is not a simple substance that can be analyzed or understood by human reason.' Andrei realizes that the laws of the transcendent world flow autonomously beyond life's painful inequalities; there is an unbridgeable gap between the laws of life, grounded in experience, and the laws of the transcendent world. This realization is particularly significant because it is closely tied to his physical injury and moribund state. The grotesque atmosphere — filled with mutilated bodies, blood, painful moans, filthy insects, and haunting visions — suggests that Andrei can only approach the truth of life by transcending the boundaries of everyday existence, within a situation fractured by the grotesque. Similarly, Rostov comes to recognize the true face of the emperor he once revered, as well as the harsh reality of war, in a field hospital filled with the stench of corpses.

Thus, in *War and Peace* — a novel with an expansive epic narrative, complex symbolism, metaphysical propositions, and lyrical aesthetics — the grotesque serves to expose the dark abysses within human beings and cast moral judgment on spiritual depravity and to depict the grotesque situation, the gap between life's beliefs and practical reality, while highlighting the epistemological limitations inherent in such conflicts.

II. The Grotesque: The Dark Abyss Within the Human Mind

In *War and Peace*, Tolstoy defines the truth of life as something that transcends individual will and understanding, rendering it a substance beyond interpretation or inference based on causal relationships. He clearly delineates between good and evil: "There is no ambiguity or uncertainty about who is good and who is evil, who is wise or foolish, cunning or ingenuous, and what is vain, false, and hypocritical" (Wasiolak 1978: 69). Platon Karataev, adapting to life, Natasha, radiating vibrant energy, and Princess Marya, a beacon of goodwill, are clearly portrayed as virtuous characters. Meanwhile, Prince Anatole Kuragin and Ellen, consumed by physical desires, along with the snobbish Prince Vassily and Boris, are depicted as villains. In this clear dichotomy of good and evil, Tolstoy employs grotesque aesthetics to portray characters who lack a soul and are spiritually depraved, as exemplified in fragmented bodies, objectified humans, animal metaphors, dreams, mysteries, demons, and madness (lunacy).

As Merezhkovsky (2000) notes, the repeated depiction of specific body parts in *War and Peace* serves to reveal the inner soul of the characters. This

aligns with Matich's observation: "The Tolstoyan metonymic detail in such instances becomes not a token of the whole, but a fetish with its own narrative momentum" (2005: 35). The grotesque details, repeated through this synecdoche, expose the inner world of negative characters.⁶ The wrinkles around Prince Vasili's mouth reveal his coarse nature, while Lise's little upper lip evokes her immature soul and meaningless words. Napoleon's white hand⁷ and Speransky's white hand remind Andrei of the spiritual absence of the dead, as he states, "Such whiteness...had only seen on the faces of soldiers who had been long in hospital" (Tolstoy 2010: 458). After the ball with Natasha, Andrei, who has regained a sense of life, finds Speransky's act of stroking his daughter with his white hand and kissing her to be "unnatural" (2010: 497). Following Lise's death, Andrei, who had a special affection for his son, intuitively recognizes the lifelessness of Speransky, who lives an artificial life consumed by the narcissism of rationalism. Andrei's disillusionment, marked by grotesque laughter with a "high-pitched voice" and startling white hands, resembles the narrator's reaction to the grotesque sounds of the dead in Dostoevsky's *Bobok*.

Furthermore, the grotesque becomes a strange other that poses existential questions to the protagonists. On a stormy, cold night, Andrei gazes at Liza's face as she suffers through the pain of childbirth, as if she were saying, "I love you all and have done no harm to anyone; why must I suffer so?" (2010: 350). Three days later, during the funeral of the little princess, both Prince Andrei Nikolayevich Bolkonsky and old Prince Nikolai Bolkonsky feel as though the "little upper lip covered with down" is repeating the same words, making them realize that they have committed an irreversible mistake. Through Liza's upper lip and the words seemingly embedded in her portrait, Andrei must confront his own guilt for having judged her subjectively without acknowledging her otherness. Andrei moves beyond Liza's terrifying words and feels as though her portrait is looking at him "simply, merrily, and inquisitively" (2010: 453) after being inspired by the vitality of the oak tree and experiencing the joy of renewal, implying that Liza's words and gaze possessed supernatural power. This prompts Andrei to realize that his life and the lives of others are of equivalent value.

Not only do grotesque metonymies carved out from the body add detail to the grotesque, but metaphors and similes involving animals and objects also contribute to its complexity. Partly agreeing with Christian's observation in *War and Peace*, where "imagery, metaphor, and metonymy are quite rare, and even similes" (1969: 143), these rhetorical elements often relate to animal imagery and

⁶ Matich, citing Merezhevsky's analysis, interprets Liza's upper lip as possessing an independent, supernatural power similar to Gogol's *Nose*: "Finally, this white hand begins to pursue one like a specter: like the young princess's upper lip, it becomes as if severed from the rest of the body. It acts independently and lives its own individual, strange, almost supernatural life, resembling a fantastic face, as in Gogol's *Nose*" (Merezhevsky, as cited in Matich, 35).

⁷ Napoleon removes his gloves and signals the marshals to start the battle with his "shapely white hand" (2010: 291), which can be seen as a symbol of cruelty and lifelessness, given that countless lives are lost at its command. Similarly, Andrei, who feels weary of life after marrying Liza, is also described as having "small white hands" (2010: 26).

the physical world governed by mathematical laws to evoke a sense of the grotesque, such as the comparison of Anna Pavlovna Scherer's soirée to "a spinning-mill" (2010: 11), likening her and her guests to a mill owner and workers, and that of Prince Vasil's speech to "a wound-up clock" (2010: 11) and Boris to "narrow, like the dining-room clock" (2010: 482). These metaphors vividly depict the lives of those who live mechanically, having lost their spiritual vitality. Just as the dining-room clock in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* serves as a metonymy for the linearity of time without reflection on life, the comparison of Boris to a dining-room clock represents his life, trapped in the repetitive cycle of the minute and second hands, and failure to achieve spiritual growth, unlike Pierre. Natasha's description of Pierre as a dark blue — a mix of the blue of the sky and the red of blood —⁸ and definition of Boris as a colorless dark gray, reminiscent of the pallor of the dead, effectively captures his lack of vitality. His inappropriate relationship with Ellen, his use of Freemasonry as a political tool, and of melancholy as a means to marry the wealthy Julie⁹, vividly reveal his dehumanized attributes. Other prominent examples include the comparison of the pleasure-seeking Pierre to a bear, Napoleon to Paris, Bagration to a "rare animal" (2010: 331), and the French army invading Russia to beasts, all of which grotesquely represent their spiritual absence.

However, the most aesthetically grotesque effects in *War and Peace* are found in metaphors involving the devil, the appearance of madmen, and grotesque phantasma. The devil is embodied by the physically corrupt Anatole. When Marya considers accepting Anatole, who has come to Bald Hills to propose, as her husband, she feels an unprecedented fear and senses that someone is standing in a dark corner behind a partition: "And this someone was he — the evil — and he was also this man with the white forehead, black eyebrows, and red lips" (2010: 242). The phantasm of the devil is conjured by Marya's pure soul, which instinctively perceives Anatole's corruption, and becomes a protective supernatural force.

The devil also appears on the opera stage, where Natasha and Anatole indulge in each other, symbolically representing Natasha's spiritual corruption. Natasha's misfortune could have been averted. When she visits Melyukova during Christmas week, Natasha learns that hearing "hammering and knocking" (2010: 566) in the barn during a fortune-telling session is an ominous sign that foretells misfortune. She hears "something metallic was struck three times" (2010: 604) during the second act of the opera; however, she is overwhelmed

⁸ When Sonya looks into the mirror for fortune-telling, she falsely claims that she sees the color red in Natasha's future husband. Natasha does eventually marry Pierre, who is represented by the color red (2010: 570). Marya's benevolent vitality is often depicted through the red blush that appears on her face.

⁹ Boris sketches a grave and inscribes the following death-related poem beside it when proposing to Julie: "Death is redemptive and death is tranquil, Ah! against sorrow there is no other recourse" (2010: 589). This bizarre proposal metaphorically reflects the grotesque nature of his life and soul.

by her physical desire for Anatole, which grows as high as Dufour's leaps, and succumbs. The eerie metallic sound, reminiscent of the grotesque peasant in *Anna Karenina*, implies that a crack has formed in Natasha's soul, allowing Anatole's corrupt soul to seep in. In the fourth act of the opera, Natasha only sees Anatole and the devil singing on stage, clearly indicating that the devil Marya saw has captured Natasha's soul.

Similar to this scene with the devil, one of the most aesthetically grotesque scenes in *War and Peace* occurs when Count Rastopchin, after brutally executing Vereshchagin to appease the enraged crowd, encounters a madman dressed in white on the desolate Sokolniki field. The mentally ill, who had been released following the abandonment of Moscow, was roaming in the fields enjoying his newfound freedom. This scene creates a terrifying, wild, and prophetic impression:

Swaying from side to side on his long, thin legs in his fluttering dressing gown, this lunatic was running impetuously, his gaze fixed on Rostopchin, shouting something in a hoarse voice and making signs to him to stop. The lunatic's solemn, gloomy face was thin and yellow, with its beard growing in uneven tufts. His black, agate pupils with saffron-yellow whites moved restlessly near the lower eyelids (2010: 958).

Just as the ghost in Gogol snatches the back of a prominent figure, reminiscent of Akaky Akakievich whose overcoat was robbed, the gaunt and sallow face with flashing pale yellowish eyes evokes memories of the dead Vereshchagin. Rastopchin is engulfed in fear; he recalls the "astonished, frightened, blood-stained" (2010: 959) face of Vereshchagin when the madman, mumbling, charges toward him. Just as the ghost in *Gogol* served as a judge calling for moral condemnation of the prominent figure who turned away from Akaky, the grotesque fear exuded by the madman suggests that Rastopchin's crimes on earth will never escape the judgment of his conscience. At that moment, Rastopchin clearly realizes that this memory will remain brutally etched in his heart.

The madman's ghastly appearance also vividly portrays both the irrational violence of the world shaped by the ruling class and the frenzied violence of the crowd that ruthlessly trampled Vereshchagin. Vereshchagin's corpse, abandoned in the square with its "long thin half-severed neck and its livid face stained with blood and dust" (2010: 956), reveals the coexistence of two contradictory forces within the crowd — dynamic energy resisting centripetal forces and mad, barbaric violence. More importantly, however, it should not be forgotten that the crowd's barbarism stemmed from the gap between their beliefs and reality. Moscow's populace firmly believed that the aristocrats, led by Commander-in-Chief Rastopchin, would never abandon Moscow, which they regarded as the soul of Russia and the center of Orthodox tradition. Enraged when everyone left the capital, leaving them behind, the mob brutally murdered Vereshchagin and incited a riot. The grotesque situation of abandoning Moscow was psychologically transferred, leading to the grotesque riot. The empty Moscow and the half-de-

capitated corpse of Vereshchagin feel all the more grotesque as they evoke the realization that the fall of the empire due to war caused the collapse of traditional values, beliefs, and morality.

However, the gruesomeness of the madman paradoxically encapsulates the potential for resurrection: "Actually the grotesque, including the Romantic form, discloses the potentiality of an entirely different world, of another order, another way of life" (Bakhtin 1984: 48). The madman who catches up with Rastopchin's carriage shouts:

Thrice have they slain me, thrice have I risen from the dead. They stoned me, crucified me ... I shall rise ... shall rise ... shall rise. They have torn my body. The kingdom of God will be overthrown ... Thrice will I overthrow it and thrice re-establish it! (2010: 958).

The stoning, the torn body, and the cross are conventional symbols representing the humiliation, suffering, and sacrifice of Jesus Christ, symbolizing the lives of the masses deprived of their right to life in the legal vacuum intended by the law. However, the repeated vow of resurrection also hints at the possibility of rebirth, which is supported by the significance of the number three. In Christianity, three represents the divine unity of the Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), as well as new life and salvation as Christ rose from the dead on the third day.¹⁰

Moreover, the Great Fire of Moscow, which served as the catalyst for Russia's resurrection, brings to mind the "fire festival" mentioned by Bakhtin, quoting Goethe, in his analysis of the universal worldview of the carnival format. He interpreted the carnival atmosphere of fire, in which burning and rebirth are cyclical, as a wish consolidating death and life. In other words, the "ancient ambivalence of the death wish" (Bakhtin 1984: 249) — "Die, so be born again" — dominates the fire festival. In this context, the Great Fire of Moscow becomes a necessary condition for rebirth. The madman's repeated cries of "death, resurrection, dissolution, and reconstruction" indicate that the fire, driven by the people, will lead to Russia's resurrection. Additionally, the madman's prophetic behavior and words serve as an allegory for the broad trajectories of Andrei and Pierre's lives marked by repeated spiritual crises and leaps,¹¹ suggesting their eventual attainment of spiritual freedom.

¹⁰ Numbers carry various symbolic meanings in addition to their quantitative value: "In symbolism, numbers are not merely the expressions of quantities, but idea-forces, each with a particular character of its own" (Cirlot 1983: 230). Of all numbers, "three" has been a symbol of death and resurrection since ancient Greek times. Vries' dictionary (1976) describes its death-related connotation: "Three: death and regeneration: a. Greek: number sacred to the dead: invoked three times and mourned for three days; b. The Threefold Great Goddess is goddess of death and regeneration: the cycle of fertility: (re)birth, growth, and decay;" (463). "Three" has a special meaning in Eastern culture as well: "The Chinese called three a perfect number (ch'eng) as an expression of wholeness and fulfilment — nothing can be added to it" (Chevalier & Gheerbrant 1994: 993).

¹¹ Regarding Tolstoy's protagonists, Nabokov (1981) noted: "the process of seeking the Truth seemed more important to him than the truth" (141).

Interestingly, after the madman's scene on the Sokolniki field, Pierre is described as being "in a state of excitement bordering on insanity" (2010: 966). His madness stems from his mission to save Russia after witnessing Moscow's fall to the French army. As Pierre delves deeper into the esoteric connection between his name and Bonaparte's, his madness consumes him, reaching its peak with the appearance of Makar, the brother of Iosif Alexeevich. The lunatic Makar circles around Pierre, who is engrossed in his plan to assassinate Napoleon in Iosif's study. Eventually, Makar seizes a pistol and, mistaking a French officer for Napoleon, fires it. This episode reveals a kinship between Pierre and Makar, as both are gripped by madness and share the delusion of assassinating Napoleon to save Russia. This serves as a satire on the recklessness of attempting to assassinate Napoleon in the name of saving Russia.

Notably, this ludicrous incident takes place in Iosif's study and home. Ironically, the prophecy about Napoleon derived from the Book of Revelation was communicated to Pierre by a fellow Freemason. Pierre attempted the assassination in Iosif's study, ironically linking Pierre's madness and violence to the doctrine of Freemasonry. Pierre, who underwent an initiation ceremony in a grotesque setting filled with skulls, coffins, and darkness, experiences a fleeting joy of self-purification. However, the next day, he demands that Vasili leave the room with a face full of "fury" (2010: 388) as Vasili tries to reconcile him with Ellen. Ellen and Boris have an inappropriate relationship; during Boris's initiation ceremony, Pierre confesses, "I wished really to stab his bare breast with the sword I held to it" (2010: 473). Even in his diary, where he reflects on the doctrine of Freemasonry for self-purification, Pierre pours out his frenzied rage against Dolokhov. Pierre's madness reveals that the core doctrine of Freemasonry, self-purification, is an empty concept.

Apart from these metaphors and symbolisms, the grotesque in *War and Peace* functions as an aesthetic device that unveils the presence of a world beyond reality. For example, when delirious, Tushin perceives a unique realm where reality and fantasy overlap:

...Tushin did not experience the slightest unpleasant sense of fear, and the thought that he might be killed or badly wounded never occurred to him. On the contrary he became more and more elated. ... It seemed to him that ... the corner of the field he stood on was well known and familiar ground. he was in a state akin to feverish delirium or drunkenness. ... from the sight of all these things a fantastic world of his own had taken possession of his brain and at that moment afforded him pleasure. The enemy's guns were in his imagination not guns but pipes from which occasional puffs were blown by an invisible smoker (2010: 205).

Tushin, who embodies oxymoronic images of the "wise fool" and the "tragic clown", recreates the horrific moments of war as a unique world of fantasy. In his drunken delirium, Tushin imagines the enemy's cannons as tobacco pipes emitting round rings of smoke and perceives the war as an exhilarating game. In this state, as if driven by supernatural forces, he transcends the fear of death

and perceives the here-and-now as his familiar “Heimat” (rootedness). Considering that the fear of death arises from the consciousness of being separated from the wholeness of nature, and the sense of immortality from the feeling of being united with nature in oneness, Tushin’s immersion suggests that he resonates with the cyclical order of nature, which cannot be analyzed or predicted by the power of reason. Observing Tushin in this delirious state, Andrei recovers a sense that the world around him is unfamiliar, gaining an intuitive perception of a transcendent world beyond the phenomenal one, which cannot be proven by reason. The “sky” at Austerlitz was possible because of this awareness.

As demonstrated in Tushin’s transcendental experience of “Heimat” and Andrei’s intuitive perception of a transcendent world, the grotesque in *War and Peace* functions as a device to expose the dark abyss of the human psyche and to embody a moral judgment on spiritual corruption as well as an aesthetic device that reveals the presence of another world beyond reality from an epistemological perspective. The next section sheds light on the epistemological challenges encountered by the protagonists, focusing on the character of Andrei.

III. The Grotesque: The Gap Between Existence and Eternity

In *War and Peace*, Tolstoy asserts that life is a reality that can never be fully understood by human reason.¹² This is the source of Andrei’s tragedy. Unlike Pierre, who adapted to the self-sufficient flow of life, Andrei took a rational approach to life’s truths, enduring the pain of seeing his beliefs and hopes shattered against the wall of reality. He eventually realized that even the empirical laws learned from that pain were futile against the truth of the transcendent world.¹³ The grotesque is a crucial device for depicting these clashes and conflicts.

Moreover, this awareness and revelation are intricately connected to grotesque aesthetics. Truth is revealed to Andrei unknowingly, in states of “sickness, exhaustion, or a kind of absent-mindedness” (Wasiolek 1978: 74). According to Morson (1987: 205), “Tolstoy’s absolute perspective derives directly from his sense of the mind as largely disordered”, suggesting that Andrei’s revelations are linked to grotesque motifs such as dismembered bodies, agonized groans, bleeding, flies, and the vision of the Sphinx, indicating that truth can only be accessed in a fractured state, alienated from human reason. The sky-gazing at Austerlitz, Liza’s death, soldiers bathing in a filthy pond, and the wounds and deaths at the Battle of Borodino exemplify Andrei’s grotesque encounters.

¹² Berlin (1993: 91–93) and Morson (1985: 5) explained that the internal struggle between individuality and universality forms the foundation of Tolstoy’s artistry; unable to find the universal laws governing life and history, Tolstoy granted his protagonists freedom while concealing his own desires. In contrast, Wasiolek (1978: 8–9, 20–21), Clay (1989: 43–88), and Gustafson (1986: 132) argued that Tolstoy’s characters were dedicated to overcoming personal desires and seeking the universal laws inherent in everyday life.

¹³ Eikhenbaum (1968: 40) and Carden (1978: 519–534) shared the view that Tolstoy manifested the mental world of his characters through their experiences. Carden focused on the fluid process by which the self grows and changes in response to these experiences.

After Andrei's disillusionment with conjugal life, he decides to join the war, driven by a desire to shape the course of history as his idol Napoleon did. However, during Weyrother's strategy meeting, described as a "soporific drone of the mill-wheel" (2010: 280) and "une leçon de géographie"¹⁴ (2010: 279), the soldiers' sudden laughter, sparked by Tit's joke, makes Andrei aware of a "mystic power and glory" (2010: 282) hovering above him. Their belly laughs resonate more deeply than Weyrother's tedious strategy, directly mediating the mystical world that defies analysis by or inference from rational intellect. In stark contrast to the calculated plans of the meeting, the world of ordinary people is governed by the cyclical flow of nature — like the seasons — connecting naturally to their lives. Even war is absorbed into the cyclical order, symbolized by their laughter.

Andrei, once consumed by ambition like Napoleon, begins to resonate with the soldiers' laughter, sensing the "mystic power and glory", and realizes the full meaning of this more profoundly on the Pratzen Heights, where he gazes at the sky after being severely wounded. In a semi-conscious state, he perceives the limits of human will in contrast to the vastness of the sky and realizes that history is shaped by the collective flow of the masses, not by individual heroics. Napoleon is no longer a hero to him, merely a vermin attracted to the people's free will, like the flies attracted to the smell of blood. When the mortally wounded Andrei dismisses Napoleon's voice as "the buzzing of a fly" (2010: 310), swatting away the irritating fly becomes more important to him than the presence of the emperor. Ultimately, Napoleon, grotesquely portrayed as a human-vermin hybrid, prompts Andrei to reconsider the order of life he perceives and confront the inequalities and complexities of existence.

After recognizing the individual's role within the organic whole through his experience of the vast sky, Andrei is immediately faced with Liza's death. The grotesque elements of the Pratzen Heights — cold, snow, a sudden gust of wind, extinguished candles, groans of pain (animalistic sounds), bleeding, and the death of Liza, whom he had hoped would forgive him — are reenacted at Lysye Gory. The grotesque horror evoked by Liza's death fundamentally undermines Andrei's newfound understanding of life, amplifying his distrust. While the vast sky granted Andrei a new vision, allowing him to see Liza as an entirely different person, the opportunity to alleviate his guilt by asking for her forgiveness was denied. In the end, Liza's death remains a grotesque symbol demanding an explanation for life and death, engraved in Andrei's psyche and continually weighing on his inner world.

Thus, the grotesque amplifies the chasm between empirical laws of life and reality, as exemplified by the peasant rebellion in Bogucharovo. Tolstoy fully understood how peasants, dubbed "steppe-peasants" (2010: 771), who attempted to migrate to "warm rivers" (2010: 772) out of yearning for freedom, were lured into revolt by Napoleon's promise of liberation and rose up in the Smolensk region (Shklovskii 1970: 76–81). By portraying Andrei and Marya as idealistic and

¹⁴ French for "a geography lesson".

devoted landowners, Tolstoy frames their rebellion as a betrayal of goodwill. Andrei pioneered serf emancipation in Russia, relieving peasants of their duties and establishing institutions to improve their lives. Marya aimed to distribute “landlord’s grain” (2010: 779) and provide land and housing. Despite these efforts, the peasants, characterized as “boorish” by the old prince (2010: 779), rebelled, even endangering Marya’s life. This betrayal of goodwill is instrumental in construing the peasant rebellion as barbaric and animalistic — a perception exacerbated by their drunken outbursts (Hruska 2007: 636–637). This betrayal justifies the Rostov’s brutality in suppressing the riot, as if hunting animals in the field. Ultimately, confronting the grotesque barbarism of the peasants, depicted as human–animal hybrids, shatters Andrei and Marya’s beliefs and faith. Betrayed by peasants and Natasha, Andrei loses the sense of life regained through the view of the sky at the ferry and at Otradnoye. “His remaining task in the novel will be to find some transcendence of this material realm” (Gustafson 1986: 68), which is manifested in the grotesque contrast between the lyrical depiction of young girls secretly picking plums from the greenhouse tree and soldiers bathing in a dirty pond. This chance encounter with the young girls prompts Andrei to recognize the inherent equality of all autonomous wills, irrespective of individual interests or values. Whether it is Andrei reforming Bogucharovo, the peasants rebelling against Marya, Bagration immersed in military strategy, or a young girl stealing plums, everyone’s capacity as an autonomous being demands equal recognition.

However, Andrei’s sense of equality is short-lived. The naked white bodies, likened to “carp stuffed into a watering can” (2010: 755), wallowing in the dirty pond evoke the grotesque. These bodies are symbolic of the limitations of the physical world in stark contrast to the sky (Gustafson 1986: 67–68); they evoke disgust and horror in Andrei, who senses the presence of another force beyond the earthly world that consumes the autonomous will of individuals as mere cannon fodder. This realization, encapsulated in the chilling phrase “flesh, bodies, chair à canon!” (2010: 756), foreshadows his tragic destiny. When mortally wounded at Borodino and confronted with a tent filled with blood-soaked bodies filling the dirty pond, Andrei shudders. This stems not from fear or the grim reality of a wounded soldier, but from the irrevocable knowledge of his impending doom, which he has been powerless to evade.

This grotesque atmosphere persists until the moment of his death. Andrei is taken to a field hospital filled with nightmarish scenes: blood-soaked people, crows cawing anxiously at the smell of blood, sharp screams from those writhing in pain, and Anatole’s anguished cries as he stares at his severed leg still encased in its boot. Witnessing Anatole’s misery and impending death, Andrei is reminded of the divine love — compassion, brotherhood, and love for one’s enemies — that he had long neglected, as well as Marya’s plea for the love of God. In this moment, he forgives Anatole, feeling both compassion and a profound sense of shared humanity.

Physical pain acts as a catalyst for Andrei's spiritual rebirth. Although a staunch rationalist, his severe wound paradoxically draws him closer to divine revelation by suspending rational thought. Andrei's intellectual journey was profoundly influenced by "stimuli external to his will" (Weeks 1989: 72). In essence, physical suffering and external cues ignite the mental processes that lead to moral awareness. The grotesque aesthetic exposes two critical truths: moments of profound insight often emerge from a fractured consciousness, and the revelations sparked by such grotesque stimuli are inherently incomplete.

When Andrei regains consciousness in a hut in Mytishchy, he recalls the divine love he felt in the field hospital and requests a copy of the Gospels from the doctor. However, before he can receive the word of God, he loses consciousness again due to extreme pain. Upon regaining consciousness for the third time, as foretold by the madman on the Sokolniki field, Andrei undergoes a perceptual shift. He becomes acutely aware of the sounds around him — the chirping of crickets, distant singing and shouting, the rustling of cockroaches on the table and icons, and the buzzing of a fly. In this heightened state, he envisions "some strange airy structure being erected out of slender needles or splinters" (2010: 989) rising in harmony with the sound of the crickets, and he notices a white Sphinx at the door.¹⁵ The juxtaposition of sacred iconography and filthy cockroaches, a blood-engorged fly, its incessant torturous buzzing "piti-piti-piti and ti-ti and piti-piti-piti" (2010: 989), hallucinations where reality and illusion intersect, and the spectral presence of a white Sphinx¹⁶ conjures a macabre, dream-like, grotesque phantasm. These grotesque external stimuli plunge Andrei into a liminal space where he recalls divine love and extends forgiveness to Anatole and Natasha. However, the uncertain trajectory of his salvation remains. The persistent auditory torment of crickets and flies evokes God's command to love one's enemies but is simultaneously undermined by the hallucinatory, crumbling aerial structure, symbolizing the tenuous nature of his newfound faith. The Sphinx-like apparition of Natasha underscores Andrei's inability to reconcile either human and divine love or the earthly and transcendent realms.

In Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, the Sphinx poses riddles, devouring those who fail to answer her enigmatic questions. Those who solve the riddles claim victory over the monstrous creature. Andrei's perception of Natasha as a Sphinx-like figure, followed by his demise, suggests an analogous narrative. His epiphany of divine love, sparked by the sight of Anatole's maimed body, does not resolve the Sphinxian riddle of reconciling divine and human love. Given the

¹⁵ John Weeks (1989: 61–81) posits that the incessant auditory assault of crickets and cockroaches in Andrei's final hours sustains his waning consciousness while simultaneously inducing a synesthetic moral awakening. This paper argues that these grotesque sensory inputs precipitate a descent into profound doubt, casting even the perception of divine love into question.

¹⁶ The term "grotesque" derives from "grotte", referring to Roman-era underground caves decorated with hybrid creatures like sphinxes alongside natural elements (Kayser 1966: 19–20). This etymological link underscores the intrinsic connection between the grotesque and the image of the Sphinx.

Sphinx's interrogation of human existence's fundamental nature within *Oedipus Rex*, Andrei's ultimate failure implies a persistent inability to reconcile individual autonomy with the divine order. Moreover, as the riddle posed by the Sphinx encapsulates fundamental questions about humans and human life¹⁷ and the theme of *Oedipus Rex* is closely related to the limitations of human knowledge,¹⁸ Andrei's death suggests that he did not find the meaning of individual autonomy within the divine order.

As death approaches, Andrei seeks solace in the notion of returning to a divine, eternal source. However, he dismisses these thoughts as intellectual constructs, admitting they lacked clarity and authenticity: "Something was lacking in them, they were not clear, they were too one-sidedly and brain-spun" (2010: 1058–1059). Andrei dies with the rather ambiguous words, "death is waking up from sleep" (2010: 1059), suggesting a transition into an unknown realm, a new beginning shrouded in mystery. This enigmatic state might be likened to the Sphinx's riddle, eternally inviting exploration without yielding definitive answers. The grotesque aesthetic underscores the limitations of human reason in comprehending such profound mysteries, implying that life's authenticity resides not in the intellectual pursuit of the undefinable, but in direct engagement with the world as it is.

IV. Conclusions

The grotesque refers to the sudden transformation of ordinary reality into something uncanny, triggered by the realization that what was once considered certain is, in fact, an illusion, and the established order of everyday life is no longer valid. In literature, it serves as a mode that unveils the harsh truths that emerge from the chasm between the conscious agent's beliefs and the actual truth, by exposing the ultimate substance of the uncanny.

In *War and Peace*, the grotesque effectively embodies Tolstoy's literary artistry. Through the lives of protagonists with differing values and souls, Tolstoy sought to contrast lives that are good and desirable with those that are not. The grotesque reveals the dark abyss of human nature and spiritual corruption through eerie impressions and unsettling fears. Fragmented bodies, human–animal or human–object hybrids, devils, and madmen are key motifs that symbolize characters who have lost their true nature and live without authenticity.

¹⁷ The answer to the Sphinx's question, "What walks on four feet in the morning, two in the afternoon and three at night" is a human being. The fact that a human is 4, 2, and sometimes 3 prompts a fundamental reflection on the inherent uncertainty and variability of human life.

¹⁸ This concept is inherently expressed by the name "Oedipus", a name derived from the Greek words "oida" (to know) and "pous" (foot), interpreted as "one who knows by measuring with his feet". This suggests a character who seeks to understand and control the world through reason and logic. The limitations of human intellect are demonstrated by the uselessness of his reason in the face of the tragic fate dictated by the gods, demonstrating the existence of a divine realm beyond human reason.

In *War and Peace*, the grotesque is to reveal the chaotic reality that arises from the disparity between Andrei's idealistic worldview and the harsh truths of existence. At the same time, it embodies the novel's central theme of life's inherent unknowability. Andrei's epiphanies are closely connected to grotesque motifs such as physical illness, vermin, and the enigmatic Sphinx, suggesting that when the mind is fractured by bodily affliction, it allows a glimpse into the transcendent — a perception beyond reason, revealing a reality that eclipses the material world. Through this, Tolstoy cautions against the intellectual hubris of analyzing and predetermining life and history, instead advocating for a mode of existence that harmonizes with the universe's grand cyclical order, as exemplified by Tushin's delirious immersion in life. Given the organic interplay between Tolstoy's complex ideas and his masterful narrative techniques, which together form the essence of his literary world, analyzing *War and Peace* through the lens of grotesque aesthetics offers a promising avenue for deepening our understanding of his literary mastery.

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Инсон Чои

ЕСТЕТИКА ГРОТЕСКОГ У ТОЛСТОЈЕВОМ ДЕЛУ *РАТ И МИР*

Резиме

Циљ овог рада јесте анализа Толстојевог романа *Рат и мир* из перспективе гротескне естетике. Гротеска је књижевни стил који настоји да открије скривену стварност ствари које су до сада сматране очигледним, користећи необичан језик и наизглед узнемирујуће слике. У *Рату и миру*, гротескно ефикасно отелотворује Толстојево књижевно умеће. Чудноватост и ужас који гротескно призива, попут фрагментираних тела, лудила, демонских визија, смрти, пошести, хибрида људи и предмета или животиња, као и метонимијска имажинација која је повезана са фрагментираном телесношћу, откривају тамну провалију људске психе или представљају моралну осуду духовне изопачености.

Још израженије и специфичније одлике гротеског у роману *Рат и мир* откривају јаз између истине о животу, онаком каквом је доживљава главни јунак Андреј, и објективне стварности, из епистемолошке перспективе. Откривајући тај јаз, гротескно се користи као естетско средство за представљање основне теме дела: „Људи су слепи за суштину живота“. Андрејева откровења тесно су повезана са гротескним мотивима као што су физичке болести, лешеви, пошести и Сфинга, што сугерише да свест расцепкана услед екстремне физичке патње може да сагледа трансцендентни свет изван домаћаја разума и стекне осећај за ноуменални свет изван феноменалног. Кроз овакве теме Толстој упозорава на покушаје да се живот и историја анализирају и унапред одређују искључиво разумом, и уместо тога предлаже начин живота који се одвија у складу са великим циклусима универзума.

Имајући у виду Толстојево уметничко умеће у вештом уткивању сложених идеја у наративе путем суптилних књижевних поступака, истраживање *Рата и мира* кроз призму гротескне естетике представља обећавајући правац за дубље разумевање његовог књижевног генија.

Кључне речи: Лав Толстој, *Рат и мир*, гротескно, тамна провалија, епистемологија.