Prince Andrei’s Quest in Leo Tolstoy’s War and Peace

Nature plays a dramatic role in War and Peace. It is central to Prince Andrei’s understanding of life and his discovery of truth. Generally it is from the outside, from nature, that most of the shifts in Prince Andrei come. He stays connected with nature after his near death experience at Austerlitz. He also identifies with its elements, such as the bare oak-tree, which he passes on the way to Natasha Rostova’s estate. Natasha’s connection with nature has a profound influence on Prince Andrei’s emotional rejuvenation. Natasha Rostova transforms Prince Andrei’s outlook on life, giving him a reason to live and love once again; she is a rejuvenating force that makes a dramatic impact on a character who is lost and dissatisfied with life. Elements of nature, such as the Austerlitz sky and a gnarled oak-tree serve as the stepping stones for Prince Andrei’s quest, but it is Nature, as represented by Natasha, which puts him on the path towards a meaningful life and a love for humanity.

Prince Andrei is a reason driven character. He is egotistical and has an air of arrogance and cynicism about him in the beginning of the novel. During the battle at Austerlitz, where the Russian army faces the French invaders, Bolkonsky wishes to become famous, just like his hero, Napoleon, who ironically is his country's enemy. During the battle when most people are concerned with survival, Prince Andrei is hoping to have his ‘Toulon,’ just like his idol Napoleon. He strives to become famous and successful in his military career, not giving a single thought to the idea of how precious life really is. However, his destiny has something different in store for him: when
wounded and dying, he is faced with a whole new world beyond reason, the world of emotion which is closely associated with nature in *War and Peace*. For the first time in his life, Prince Andrei abandons his cold logic that called for glory and success and lets nature take over, showing him that there is more to life than he thought. Bolkonsky finds peace within. A chance at a happy and meaningful life he never experienced before emerges from Prince Andrei’s near death experience.

The sky of Austerlitz is a symbol of spiritual awakening connected with the natural world beyond human reason. "The lofty sky" over the battlefield where Prince Andrei lies dying opens his mind to opportunities for a meaningful life, connection with God and spirituality. Prince Andrei experiences a feeling similar to epiphany:

Над ним не было ничего уже, кроме неба,—высокого неба, не ясного, но все-таки неизмеримо высокого, с тихо ползущими по нем серыми облаками... “Как же я не видал прежде этого высокого неба? И как я счастлив, что узнал его наконец. Да! все пустое, все обман, кроме этого бесконечного неба. Ничего, ничего нет, кроме его. Но и того даже нет, ничего нет, кроме тишины, успокоения. И слава богу!..(vol.1, 300) [Above him was nothing, nothing but the sky,—the lofty sky, not a clear sky, but still infinitely lofty, with grey clouds creeping gently across... How can it be that I've never seen that lofty sky before? Oh, how happy I am to have found it at last. Yes! It's all vanity, it's all an illusion, everything except this infinite sky. There is nothing, nothing—that's all there is. But there isn't even that. There is nothing but stillness and peace. Thank God for that! (vol. 1, 299)]
Bolkonsky’s whole philosophy on life is changed within seconds. He no longer seeks approval and glory on the battlefield. A new realization about life and happiness, which he never seemed to have experienced before, brings him peace. Prince Andrei is not the same vain man looking for glory and fame. He rejects the ideals and idols he cherished for so long.

The emotional and spiritual changes in Prince Andrei are evident when he sees Napoleon, as he lies on the battlefield, mortally wounded and almost dead. Bolkonsky acknowledges the presence of his former hero, but is no longer under his spell. Prince Andrei disregards Napoleon's words as «жужжание мухи» (“the buzzing of a fly”) (vol. 1, 311). The overwhelming desire to live out this newly discovered meaning of life is stronger than the pull in the old direction. Bolkonsky has begun his transformation by rejecting his old idols, Napoleon and glory:

он видел над собою далеко, высокое и вечное небо. Он знал, что это был Наполеон—его герой, но в эту минуту Наполеон казался ему столь маленьким, ничтожным человеком в сравнении с тем, что происходило теперь между его душой и этим высоким, бесконечным небом с бегущими по нем облаками...он желал только, чтоб эти люди помогли ему и возвратили бы его к жизни, которая казалась ему столь прекрасною, потому что он так иначе понимал ее теперь (vol.1, 311). [There above him was the lofty, far distant, unending sky. He knew—it was Napoleon—his hero—but at that moment Napoleon seemed to him such a tiny inconsequential creature compared with everything that was now transpiring between his spirit and that lofty sky-blue infinity with
its busy clouds. ...he had only desire for these people to help him and bring him back to life, because life was good and he saw it all differently now (vol.1, 311).]

The new revelations force Prince Andrei to attract someone’s attention, so that they will save him and he might have a chance at life again. An enormous desire to live and experience everything that was closed to him before enchants Bolkonsky. He is not ready to die; his young soul has just started a search that will characterize him for the rest of the book. Prince Andrei is far from a complete comprehension of the meaning of life. However, the importance of this newly acquired understanding of life set in motion by Bolkonsky’s near death experience under the Austerlitz sky will provide him strength to continue his spiritual journey.

The horrors of war, the slaughter of people and the acts of killing which Lev Tolstoy himself thought monstrous, inhuman, and inexcusable; these are reflected in Bolkonsky's mental state after his physical recovery. The depression, which the war and the death of his wife has plunged him into, does not heal. There are no signs of restoration. Bolkonsky now views his life through the prism of despair, destruction and death. Nature reflects Bolkonsky's emotional and mental state when his carriage drives by the oak tree on the way to Natasha Rostova's estate, Otradnoe. His detachment from life is especially apparent when he fails to notice the early arrival of spring that has rejuvenated and painted green everything except for the old gnarled oak tree. Spring does not occupy his mind. He is eager to identify his emotional state with the tree's old and dead appearance: «он старым, сердитым и презрительным уродом стоял...» (vol. 2,
Prince Andrei’s mind remains dormant; the search for kindness and peace within becomes repressed by the brutal circumstances of war and the devastating loss of people he loves. Bolkonsky’s search, the epitome of which are Love and God, the two most important themes in War and Peace, comes to a halt.

The most important influence on Prince Andrei is Natasha Rostova. She embodies the force of nature; she is a vessel for life and love. She is positive and lively, and, of course, in tune with the natural circle of life. The sheer presence of this young woman makes Prince Andrei acutely aware of his existence, which he now wants to link with this animated, lively and enigmatic person. It is important to note that the scene is set in early spring, the season most identified with nature's awakening, with the celebration of life and love. Natasha is drawn to the sky, an important symbol that signifies a new moral world for Prince Andrei. She wants to fly away; she presents an altered version of that “lofty sky,” channeling it through her innocent mind. She says: «Так бы вот села на корточки, вот так, подхватила бы себя под коленки—туже, как можно туже, натужиться надо, —и полетела бы. Вот так!» (vol. 2, p. 453). ["If you rock back on your heels like this—watch—and squeeze your knees together—hold them tight, as tight as you can—one big squeeze and you could—fly away!... Like this—look!”(vol. 2, p. 458).] The word “натужиться”/ "to strain" implies that that one needs to use a significant amount of strength that is not used on a regular basis. Similarly, an extraordinary effort on Prince Andrei’s part is needed to come back to the right path. Richard Gustafson, in his book Leo Tolstoy, Resident and Stranger, identifies the main discourse in Prince Andrei’s changed attitude towards life: “The purpose of life is to be loved by others; exile
and isolation are signs of failure. To be happy, one must participate in the arena of action” (63). Love and life, inseparable here, are the motivation and moving force that help Prince Andrei. Nature is his main source of enlightenment.

Prince Andrei enters the novel as a selfish reason-ruled cynic, but after his encounter with Natasha, he learns a valuable lesson: to live in harmony with himself and others, who are equally important. His transformation is so sudden that it surprises him. On the way back from Otradnoe, he sees the same old oak-tree, but now it is covered with lush green leaves. He is amazed to see how spring has changed it; his kinship with the oak-tree signifies the link between him and nature, which is revived by Natasha. This connection, first established during the battle of Austerlitz, with the sky as a symbol of moral salvation and spiritual rebirth, becomes stronger.

Natasha serves as a catalyst for Bolkonsky’s transformation. Tolstoy uses Natasha’s character to propel Prince Andrei onto his journey, but the work he has to undertake is his alone to do. Andrei must rediscover his purpose in life: to let others know that he exists and to live with them and for them. The whole demeanor of Andrei Bolkonsky changes dramatically, when he suddenly realizes:

Нет, жизнь не окончена в тридцать один год, —вдруг окончательно, беспеременно решил Князь Андрей. —Мало того, что я знаю всё то, что есть во мне, надо, чтоб и все знали это: и Пьер и эта девочка, которая хотела улететь в небо, надо, чтобы не жили они так, как эта девочка, независимо от моей жизни, чтобы на всех она отражалась и чтобы все они жили со мною вместе (vol. 2, 454) [No, life isn’t over at thirty-one,’ was his instant, final and irrevocable conclusion. 'It is not
enough for me to know what about it—Pierre, and that girl who wanted to fly up into the sky—they must all get to know me. My life must be lived for me but also for other people. They mustn't live like that girl, separated from me. My life must be reflected in them and they must live along with me, all of us together’ (vol.2, 459).

Bolkonsky wants to become an active force in Russia’s political and social life again, while not denying himself a chance at happiness. He starts working on the Army Regulations Committee and helps Speransky revise the section on Personal Rights, performing an important task of helping the government take better care of Russian citizens. Later on in the novel Bolkonsky and Natasha become engaged, therefore solidifying Prince Andrei’s bond with nature through Natasha Rostova.

*War and Peace* represents Lev Tolstoy’s desire to show that love for humanity can overpower violence; that spiritual truth is attainable through Nature and God is ever-present in people’s lives. The microcosm that surrounds Prince Andrei during the course of his “reason-ruled” existence is interrupted by this close encounter with death on the battlefield at Austerlitz and then by the influence of Natasha Rostova’s passionate conviction about life’s beauty and meaning. These force him to pay close attention to nature, guiding him on the path towards moral enlightenment and spiritual salvation. Tolstoy’s deep personal convictions about God impacted his representation of Prince Andrei as one of the principal characters, whose complicated moral quest, resembling a labyrinth, is illustrated throughout *War and Peace*. At first, emotionally unavailable Prince Andrei resembles a lost man trying to find his way out of the deadly and dark labyrinth. He awakens when a breath of death reaches him, forcing him to look upward,
at the sky. The sky connects Bolkonsky to God, but just as he finds the right path, he seems to lose it again, until Natasha unknowingly helps to guide him through the labyrinth of life towards the open arms of Nature, which represents a connection between a human and God. Prince Andrei’s progress towards a meaningful life and an acceptance of God fulfill Tolstoy’s desire to create a character that illustrates his unique outlook on Christian beliefs and his faith in Love and Peace.
Works Cited

