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A Hermeneutic Reading of War and Peace
A Case Study in Bibliotherapy

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Abstract

This study examines the dynamics and hermeneutic potential of bibliotherapy reading groups through the lens of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. Using Mérei's concept of the "value dimension," the research explores how participants emotionally identify with literary characters, internalising the values represented in the narrative. The group's discussions, shaped by Rudas' observations on group dynamics, reveal how resistance, intellectualisation, and interdependent interactions facilitate deeper reflection rather than hinder it. Special attention is given to female roles and socialisation, illustrating historical and contemporary transformations in gendered experiences. The rebirth archetype, as described by Bodkin, frames conversations around death, renewal, and the individuation process, while the concept of the "text monad," inspired by Leibniz, captures the hidden, organising tensions that guide the group's focus. Findings indicate that engagement with epic realist literature in a structured yet flexible group setting can enhance self-awareness, moral reflection, and existential understanding, producing a therapeutic flow that bridges literary and lived experience.

Keywords: bibliotherapy; hermeneutics; group dynamics; value dimension; archetypes and individuation; female roles and socialisation

Introduction

This study presents the work of a reading group held between the autumn of 2023 and the spring of 2024. The group read Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, attempting to extend the scope of hermeneutic interpretation into the domain of bibliotherapy. This approach did not aim at therapeutic intervention per se, but rather at understanding the world and reality conveyed through the text, while maintaining an awareness that the intensive discussion of a literary work may, as

a by-product, exert a healing or therapeutic effect on participants' individual concerns. The choice of text was motivated by the new Hungarian edition of *War and Peace* (Tolstoy, 2022); the novel's "worldliness," or capacity to represent a complete world, provided the conceptual foundation for our aim.

Can a nineteenth-century novel respond to the existential questions of contemporary readers? According to Hans-Georg Gadamer's notion of the "fusion of horizons," our present horizon is always embedded in historical understanding: we do not simply comprehend the past as past, but grasp the "thing itself." Following Johann Gustav Droysen, Gadamer interprets this as the expression of "permanently fixed manifestations of life" ("dauernd fixierte Lebensäußerungen," Gadamer, 1990, 391) that find their voice through the interpreter. This means, among other things, that through a literary work we are able to access and comprehend the emotional content of recurring, universal human experiences.

Maud Bodkin – who was among the first to apply Freudian and, especially, Jungian concepts to literary analysis – argued that such fundamental experiences constitute the core narratives of great literary works. She termed these "archetypal patterns" (Bodkin, 1934). One such pattern is the image of the child and that of the wise old man, representing two aspects of the same developmental process: maturation into adulthood.

This dynamic is clearly observable in *War and Peace*: the protagonist, Pierre Bezukhov, embodies the the child archetype, while his mentor, Platon Karataev, represents the wise old man. According to Bodkin, the study of an emotional pattern corresponding to a poetic theme, for instance, the Oedipus complex, becomes possible through the imaginative experience mediated by great poetry – such as Sophocles' tragedy. Precisely because these identical patterns recur under varying social conditions, by following the lives of *War and Peace*'s archetypal characters we are confronted with both the limitations and the possibilities inherent in our contemporary system of social values, as reflected through the differing historical horizon of Tolstoy's world.

This approach is closely related to the so-called narrative agency model developed by Finnish researchers. The Finnish reading groups, however, juxtapose perspectives derived from culturally and socially accepted contemporary narratives in order to raise participants' awareness of divergent narrative frameworks (Kinnunen, Meretoja & Kosonen, 2024). In contrast, my group placed greater emphasis on differentiating between historical and

contemporary horizons (Jauss, 1997) and on facing existential concerns such as death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness (Yalom, 2019).

In terms of social narratives, our group's interpretive stance corresponded most closely to the social-psychological approach of the Hungarian psychologist Ferenc Mérei (Mérei, 1987). The overall model of the group process was informed by Jung's concept of individuation, following the pattern proposed by Andrea Imrei (Imrei, 2016). The protagonist, Pierre Bezukhov, follows the developmental trajectory of the child archetype; his maturation into adulthood lies at the core of Tolstoy's novel. Accordingly, our initial focus was intended to be on his moral and psychological development. As the sessions progressed, however, it became evident that numerous parallel male and female role possibilities emerged, each offering a potential point of identification or entry for individual readers – allowing each participant to "choose their own protagonist" and thereby experience catharsis in a personally meaningful way.

How, then, does this make the novel suitable for a social-psychological interpretation? The composition of our group, characterised by a generally intellectualising attitude, gave rise to defensive group-dynamic processes. As a result, greater emphasis was placed on value dimensions that could be described in role-based behavioral terms (Mérei, 1987). Two distinct value dimensions emerged in the interpretive process of the novel: first, the patriarchal order of the older generation – hierarchical, rational, and centered on nation and ruler – symbolised by war and notably devoid of female presence; and second, the more sensitive, family-centered worldview of the younger generation, in which sympathetic and assertive female characters gain prominence.

Contrary to my initial plan, the interpretive focus gradually shifted toward this latter dimension, culminating in the emergence of a modern conception of female identity and agency. I have termed the latent force that shaped this group process – the tension between archetypes structuring the narrative, the interplay of value dimensions, and the fusion of historical and contemporary horizons – the text monad, borrowing the expression from Leibniz. In the following sections, I will explore how this latent interpretive energy manifested itself within my *Tolstoy group*.

The Group

The group was announced under the title *Tolstoy Therapy*, alluding to Lucy Horner's witty book of the same name (Horner, 2013). Between September 2023 and April 2024, the group met at the elegant *Harmony Palace* venue in downtown Budapest. The group consisted of nine members – six women and three men – representing a range of age groups. Meetings were held once a month on weekends, each lasting three to four hours.

It was a special group in terms of composition: two members were undergoing bibliotherapy training in different institutions, two were practicing therapists (one a child psychiatrist), while the remaining participants were lay readers drawn to the group by their interest in Russian literature and Tolstoy's work in particular.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework: Narrative Hermeneutics

Our theoretical and methodological approach was closely aligned with the narrative hermeneutics developed by Finnish scholar Hanna Meretoja. According to Meretoja's definition (Kinnunen, Meretoja & Kosonen, 2024), the "narrative" refers to the interpretive activity of cultural meaning-making, in which participants communicate their experiences to others from a particular perspective, as part of a coherent and meaningful account. In the Finnish researchers' so-called "narrative agency" model, hermeneutics denotes the *existential significance* of narratives.

In my group, hermeneutics followed the Gadamerian conception, which implies that diverse perspectives and possible human choices were articulated not only from the personal viewpoints of participants but also from within the historical horizon of the fictional characters themselves. To facilitate this, I incorporated creative tasks – such as writing letters in the voices of the novel's characters.

To achieve what Gadamer calls a "fusion of horizons," I adopted a training exercise by Hungarian clinical psychologist Gábor Pintér, entitled *A Series of Lies* (Pintér, 2022, 95). In its original form, this technique requires participants, acting as characters, to tell only invented facts about themselves, thereby serving the function of wish fulfillment. My intention, however, was different: to allow the group members' repressed contents and shadow aspects of personality to find expression behind their socially constructed roles.

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In my modified version of the exercise, each participant created an imaginary character placed among the figures of the novel and engaged in written correspondence – in character – with the protagonist, Pierre Bezukhov. This newly invented persona viewed the events from a contemporary reader's horizon, while simultaneously representing a social role typical of the early nineteenth century. At the same time, this fictional self also gave voice to unconscious elements of the participant's own psyche.

Social Psychology

Our interpretation of the novel was most closely aligned with Ferenc Mérei's social-psychological approach. Mérei (1987) emphasises that literary works can be analysed through psychological concepts in much the same way as dreams or fantasies. However, in contrast to early psychoanalytic interpretations, his focus is not on the author's psyche but on the psychological reality of the characters. In Mérei's social-psychological readings, the central concern is to explain behavioral strategies – that is, the modes of behavior, social representation, and underlying value dimensions that shape interaction. In my view, it is precisely in this focus on interpretive agency and value construction that Mérei's model converges with the Finnish researchers' narrative agency framework.

Method

Our sessions followed the three components of Nicholas Mazza's RES model (*Receptive, Expressive, Symbolic*; Mazza, 2022). Each meeting began with a receptive phase, in which selected passages were read aloud, followed by a guided discussion focusing on the participants' sympathies and antipathies toward specific characters, as well as on broader existential questions of human life. The expressive component consisted of the participants' creative writings. At every session, members composed spontaneous letters written in the voices of various fictional characters from the novel. The symbolic component was represented by the voices of the imaginary characters created by participants during the first session – characters they placed, through their imagination, in the world surrounding the protagonist.

These imagined contemporaries, "left out" by Tolstoy and appearing as Pierre's correspondents, served as metaphors of the participants' inner worlds, embodiments of their shadow selves – figures that unconsciously challenged or

provoked their consciously held values. One participant, for example, constructed an alternative storyline around the character he had invented. In his written reflection, he reported discovering that this figure had "come to life" within his inner world – that a voice had begun to speak through it, raising new and unsettling questions for him. At times, to facilitate symbolic meaning-making, we also used symbol cards, such as OH Cards and tarot imagery, to deepen the associative process.

Analytical Framework and Findings

Ferenc Mérei's analytical model distinguishes four stages:

1. Description of the level of reality (where and when the story takes place, whether it is realistic, how the characters are delineated, etc.);
2. Division into episodes;
3. Definition of the value system characteristic of each character;
4. Summary of the work's value dimensions (Mérei, 1987, 145).

In our case, the first level required no elaboration, since Tolstoy's novel is realistic and meticulously detailed in every respect.

The division into episodes was achieved by assigning specific reading sections in advance of each meeting. For every session, I also selected shorter excerpts that I distributed beforehand and read aloud during the meetings. These passages were then discussed and interpreted in detail. Each excerpt constituted a coherent whole – an episode – since *War and Peace* was originally published in serialised, novella-like installments. This episodic structure provided opportunities to focus on individual characters, the social roles they represented, their personal attitudes, and value orientations.

The synthesis of value dimensions took place at the conclusion of the group process, when each participant reflected on the character that had become most engaging or significant to them – sometimes precisely the one they had initially disliked or found repellent. According to Mérei, value manifests as a *tension* that emerges in particular situations or episodes. Participants clearly associated specific emotional tensions with their chosen characters, and through these tensions they were able to articulate personally significant, endorsed, rejected, or secretly desired values.

A few examples illustrate this process:

One older male participant realised, at the end of the process, that he regretted omitting the section about the uncle living on the country estate – the hunting episode. He recalled this character spontaneously, recognising in him a rediscovery of the natural joys of life. Another male participant, also in his sixties, chose Anatole Kuragin, one of the novel's most controversial figures, as his "hero." "He is a bit like me," he said. Anatole represented his "dark side," his personal shadow. For him, Anatole embodied a sense of unrestrained freedom that he himself felt unable to experience. A younger female participant identified with Andrei, who for her personified a male archetype that deeply intrigued her – apparently distant and inaccessible, requiring a "key" to unlock. The value associated with Andrei was that of the sensitive man, which may have symbolically addressed a tension linked to her paternal model. The youngest female participant also initially chose Andrei as her hero, as he reminded her of certain men she knew. However, by the end of the process she shifted her focus to Natasha, whose moment of comforting her mother particularly moved her. Here, the emergent value was female strength, care, and unconditional love. Another older female participant had chosen Natasha from the very beginning – especially admiring her while she was caring for Andrei. For this participant, Natasha's character traced the stages of womanhood, representing a form of female initiation, the coming-of-age process of the feminine self.

Value Dimension

The value dimension (*értékdimenzió*) is the key concept in Mérei's (1987) social-psychological analyses. It denotes the emotional surplus of value embodied by a character within a literary work. According to Mérei, the reader attains catharsis through identification with the constellation of roles – the self comes to know itself through the "other." Within a bibliotherapy group, this mechanism operates both in relation to the fictional character and to other group members. Through this dual identification, the reader internalises the values conveyed by the character and transforms them into elements of personal meaning. At the same time, the emotional polarity of attraction and repulsion reveals the personal layer of socially constructed values – the ways in which collective norms are accepted, rejected, or reinterpreted within individual experience. A third level is the system of attitudes, the pattern of schemas formed by life experiences and prior emotional learning.

Although Mérei's analyses primarily address short stories and novellas, he stresses that value-oriented interpretation is most relevant where multiple characters must be followed across several episodes – where the task is to unfold the surplus meanings that emerge in relation to the narrative structure itself. In *War and Peace*, such surplus meaning manifests above all in the female characters, who, as the novel progresses, become increasingly prominent. In our group's collective interpretation, these women embody a new, progressive vision of humanity and of the family model – one that redefines both emotional maturity and moral agency within the framework of Tolstoy's world.

Group Dynamics

As the reading process unfolded, female roles, destinies, and character arcs increasingly came into focus, and consequently, the group's development diverged from my original plan. This was made possible by the open structure of the sessions: from one meeting to the next, I adapted the selected passages and thematic emphases to the participants' expectations and emotional engagement. Originally, I had intended to focus on the key turning points in Pierre Bezukhov's life: the death of his father; his encounter with his mentor; his Masonic initiation; his dreams and diary reflections; his "heroic" intervention in preventing Countess Natasha Rostova's elopement; his unrealistic sense of mission, expressed through his cabbalistic speculation that he must assassinate Napoleon; his genuine heroic act in saving a child from the burning city of Moscow; his confrontation with death before the firing squad; his meeting with his true teacher, the peasant sage Platon Karataev; and finally, his happy marriage to Natasha.

My initial design for the eight sessions followed the Jungian archetype of the Child Hero, a mythic-folkloric pattern in which a hero who grows up without a mother encounters danger, miraculously survives, gains renewed strength, becomes a redeemer, and ultimately wins both the "kingdom" and the "princess's hand," before dying an unexpected death (Jung, 2011). Although this final event does not appear in Tolstoy's novel, the group was given the opportunity to imagine an ending for Pierre's life, extending the narrative through collective creativity. However, the group dynamics soon began to direct themselves. The interpretive and emotional focus gradually shifted from Pierre's developmental trajectory to the evolving constellation of female figures – each representing a distinct moral, relational, and existential perspective. The process

thus became self-organising, revealing how shared reading can generate spontaneous symbolic structures beyond the facilitator's original framework.

Group Dynamics and Resistance

János Rudas, a pioneer of organisational development in Hungary, offered insightful observations on group dynamics. Drawing on Lewin, Rudas (2016) defined group dynamics as the interaction and interdependence among members, and the tension of opposing forces within the group. He emphasised that a change in one part of the group inevitably entails a change in the group as a whole. Rudas identified hidden forces beneath surface-level tensions, which he termed the "duplication" of the group.

This concept refers to the parallel interpersonal processes operating behind visible group activities, often difficult to systematise or fully observe. These dynamics unfold not only among group members but also between the group and the facilitator, often manifesting as resistance. In our group, resistance became particularly salient because some participants knew each other and me beforehand, including a married couple. Consequently, rather than engaging in overly personal disclosures, participants preferred to focus on the issues and conflicts of the literary characters, rather than their own personal involvement.

Rudas considers resistance a natural defensive mechanism of personality, with intellectualisation being one common manifestation, especially in groups with shared professional backgrounds or cultural literacy. Judit Béres notes that in bibliotherapy groups, intellectualisation may appear as a form of critical attitude (Béres, 2022). In our case, the intellectualisation had a positive therapeutic effect: it emphasised hermeneutic dialogue, allowing the group to explore existential questions, historical and contemporary social roles, and male and female maturation processes within a cultural-historical horizon.

The realistic style of *War and Peace* likely contributed to this, as Rudas observed that realistic literature, through its cathartic effect, can help participants become aware of internal conflicts and reduce tensions arising from guilt or anxiety. As the Hungarian literary scholar and practitioner of hermeneutic bibliotherapy, Edit Gilbert, notes, "struggling with the text is analogous to struggling with one's own life" (Gilbert, 2014, 31). Thus, in a bibliotherapeutic context, even intellectualisation can function as a therapeutic factor, facilitating reflection and meaning-making.

Female Roles and Characters in Historical and Contemporary Context

During the third session, which focused on Pierre's initiation, the group requested to "slow down" and pay greater attention to female characters. Accordingly, for the fourth session, we selected the episode in which the cunning Prince Kuragin and his son, the womaniser Anatole, travel to the Bolkonsky family estate to request the hand of the wealthy but unattractive Princess Marya for Anatole. In the scene, Marya's father, the stern old Prince Bolkonsky, publicly insults his daughter by calling her ugly and humiliating her. I raised the question of whether this could be considered Marya's female initiation. Opinions were divided: some participants agreed, while others argued that it was merely a form of temptation. In a subsequent session, the group discussed the attempted seduction of the young Natasha – also by Anatole, Pierre's brother-in-law. A child psychiatrist in the group observed that Natasha was testing her feminine attractiveness, needing to recognise her own female power. Anatole thus functioned as an unintentional initiator, testing both women.

The psychiatrist in the group suggested that male initiation concerns integration into society, whereas female initiation focuses on learning and inhabiting socially defined female roles. A male therapist, drawing on Richard Rohr, proposed that in Western societies, women tend to follow the male life trajectory around age thirty to thirty-five. Historically, women occupied subordinate roles, gaining significance primarily through motherhood. In contemporary society, there is a transformation between old and new roles: men in their forties often feel "overtaken" by ambitious women. An experienced attorney in the group challenged Rohr's position, arguing that male and female roles are biologically predetermined. Women, he claimed, are disadvantaged by aging; even pursuing a career, they cannot escape this biological reality. The psychiatrist participant aligned with the Rohr-based perspective, illustrating through clinical examples that men often turn to drugs or alcohol to avoid competition, whereas women in their forties begin professional careers after childbearing, gradually building their careers. Only a few women can fully realise themselves in motherhood, as depicted by the heroines of *War and Peace*. The youngest female participant emphasised biological differences, suggesting that female initiation involves experiencing pain and is closely tied to the physical body.

The group ultimately concluded that initiation remains necessary in contemporary life, although it no longer occurs within structured societal rituals.

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One participant referenced Byung-Chul Han, noting that many modern problems stem from the disappearance of traditional rites of passage.

The Rebirth Archetype

The entire group process was designed to reflect the process of individuation, the development of an autonomous personality and conscious awareness. According to Jung (2018), a decisive factor in this process is the confrontation with necessity, often experienced as trauma, which compels an individual to choose their authentic path. Consequently, a recurring theme in our sessions became the confrontation with death. Tolstoy vividly portrays dying, the environment surrounding the dying, and the process of renewal after the loss of loved ones.

According to Bodkin (1934), any poetry or narrative that embodies the archetype of rebirth presents the psychological function of Jungian regression followed by progression. Symbolically, it confronts the individual with the experiences of death (regression) and rebirth (progression). Its function is to foster a higher level of consciousness, which Jung (2018) identifies as the goal of individuation.

In our group discussions, the care of the dying, their legacies, and questions of destruction and immortality were posed as existential concerns. On the other hand, we explored female roles – women as bearers of sustaining strength, family cohesion, peace, and love, as well as representatives of the post-war new generation.

The Text Monad

From a group-dynamics perspective, the shift in thematic focus led to the emergence of a spontaneous direction and dialectic within the discussions. Throughout the group process, these two opposing poles served as an underlying source of tension in an existential and philosophical sense. Bodkin (1934) considered archetypes such as various female figures or the rebirth archetype, along with their paired opposites (for example, the personifications of regression and progression), as emotional patterns. She argued that their interaction within literary texts creates a kind of rhythm, an organic tension between patterns, which constitutes the source of conflict in the work.

In my experience as a group facilitator, these contrasting emotional patterns emerged almost consecutively, in a seesaw-like interplay, accentuating each other and strongly shaping the group's interests. In our work, themes of death and various forms of femininity alternated and became central topics. I termed this organising principle of archetypal patterns, which acted as an invisible force shaping the group, the "text monad", drawing on Leibniz (1898). When a bibliotherapeutic group facilitator senses that the group instinctively resonates with the deeper connections of a text, and that the process begins to self-direct toward certain motifs or themes, it hints at something in the text's depths akin to Monads – the simple, indivisible, and formless substances Leibniz described as the element of things: " Now this connexion or adaptation of all created things to each and of each to all, means that each simple substance has relations which express all the others, and, consequently, that it is a perpetual living mirror of the universe." (Leibniz, 1898, 248)

Conclusions: Hermeneutic Insights

How can a major realist novel reflect the entire universe to the readers of a narrative hermeneutic group? The answer lies in its ability to direct attention to the extreme poles of human existence: the evolving depiction of female roles – particularly the protective, nurturing, and life-giving maternal functions – and, in contrast, the increasingly dramatic forms of destruction and death. In *War and Peace*, these forces shape the characters' destinies much like alternating currents, whose changing intensity and direction can be metaphorically mapped onto the universal alternation between manifestation and collapse – two opposing poles of the same natural energy.

This tension, which drives the narrative at a deep level, is precisely expressed by the novel's title: *War and Peace*. It becomes visible through the value dimensions represented by the characters, especially when historical and contemporary social roles and narratives are juxtaposed. For the bibliotherapeutic group facilitator, recognising the hidden presence and power of the text monad allows for more relevant existential questions to be posed. This approach can foster deeper self- and world-understanding, heightened self-reflection, and a therapeutic flow (Csíkszentmihályi, 2010) in reading, thereby enhancing the healing potential of literary engagement.

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