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Literary Analysis: The Tartar Steppes

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There is a convention that Dino Buzzati's *The Tartar Steppes* is a meditation on the farcical nature of Giovanni's fictional but historical military service. That's what it says on the back of my paperback, that it is a "scathing criticism of military life and a meditation on the human thirst for glory," and in many of the analyses I've seen.¹ This analysis will examine whether this scathing criticism is true of the text or if it is more of a personal story where we have a character dealing with these themes as well as a personality full of retrospect and regret. It's also a dynamic character whose psyche and values change over the course of the story as a result of their lengthy military service.

This analysis has three sections. First, it examines the story arc of Giovanni Drogo and the messages therein, especially as a contrast to the conventional read of farcical or scathing critique of military service. Then it will examine the use of dreaming and reality and what that means for the story and the incredible descriptions and language that accomplish this. Finally, the analysis will compare Giovanni Drogo's psyche as it changes over time with what is commonly seen in modern day military service. There is a lot of psychology in this fictional character from 1940 that is relatable if not universal to themes in modern military psychology. The transition from an outsider, to someone drowning in the vast time of their service, then nostalgically wanting glory and not wanting to leave, is an arc that is missing from the synopses and footnotes and essays in lieu of the tragic comedy of Drogo's character and the frustrations with military customs.

Giovanni Drogo

The broader arc of Giovanni Drogo is relatively simple. He arrives at the fort, optimistically, and is greeted by a grizzled veteran officer as a fresh lieutenant, and things go full circle when he greets a young lieutenant just the same as he was greeted, nearly 30 years later. "Exactly as on that day, he thought – with this difference, that the roles were changed and now it was he, Drogo, the old Captain who rode up to Fort Bastiani for the hundredth time while the new lieutenant was a certain Moro, someone he did not know."² He is conscious of this, in his internal monologue, and hates the story arc of his own life, as he is angry that nothing significant happened during his post at the fort such as an invasion or a war. "Everything was ending miserably, there was nothing further to be said."³

There is some irony, and some psychology, in that Drogo initially did not want to stay at Fort Bastiani, then 30 years later is dragged away tragically, not wanting to leave. He requested a transfer,

¹ (Buzzati, 2005 (orig 1940)) back cover

² (Buzzati, 2005 (orig 1940)) page 170

³ (Buzzati, 2005 (orig 1940)) page 191

which was denied, well before he became entrenched and obsessed with this post and the seemingly impossible and imaginary enemies plotting to invade from the northern mists.

The convention is that this whole experience is presented as farcical, that it is a message that he was a fool not to pursue personal gain and pleasures in the moment, and that he lost practically everything by putting his guard and service ahead of other things, looking more to the future than the present. And further, that his military service was a waste, or that the conventions of the fictional but realistic military in the kingdom was wasteful. For the character of Giovanni, it is often true that he does not seize the day, and frequently finds himself in a frustrated retrospective state, but he is also dutifully serving his post and home country, or kingdom, in the book. He personally does not acknowledge this, but I think it is a detail worth noting in this fictional mirror reality. We are seeing his emotions and psyche, which change a lot over time, but always in the moment. There is worth to what he is doing and he served his post up until the brink of war and invasion, which is uniquely profound for a book written in 1938 and published in 1940 when the whole world was entering into a great war.

As Drogo considers those in the cities, those who had more indulgence, more of the things he had wanted prior to his obsession with his post, such as a family, love, personal gain, he muses that “his comrades, the others down there in the city, had had an easy, happy life; now with a proud disdainful smile they had reached the goal and reaped the rewards of glory.”⁴ And yet, comically, he was dragged away as if a meaningful invasion or war was beginning in mere moments at the end of the story. “He had undergone 30 years of torture merely waiting for the enemy, and now that they were arriving he was being chased away.”⁵

When Drogo was new to Fort Bastiani, Prosdocimo, the tailor, observes and warns that “it’s a kind of illness. You’re new, sir, so watch out – you’re newly arrived; watch out while there is time.”⁶ This bluntly foreshadows the kind of psychology that Drogo will experience. He is detached when he visits his mother and lady friend and disappointed by the experience. It was cold and unfulfilling. He becomes fully indoctrinated into the customs and value system of this fictional military and then feels as if his whole life has gone by for nothing, because he did not fight, or die, as that might justify the time at the fort.

This is a personal story, heavily based upon this character and his emotions. Drogo’s feelings change constantly and had begun with a desire to leave the Fort and to stay engaged with the more normal, civilian goals. Some of these emotions are common and are frequently examined in military psychology, which will be looked at in the third section. There is a clear divergence between what could be construed as scathing criticism of military life, from this book written in 1938, and the character of Giovanni Drogo, who differs greatly from other military characters in the book, and lives a tragic comedy of not having seized moments and falling deeper and deeper into a rabbit hole of regrets.

Dreaming in The Tartar Steppes

⁴ (Buzzati, 2005 (orig 1940)) page 191

⁵ (Buzzati, 2005 (orig 1940)) page 191

⁶ (Buzzati, 2005 (orig 1940)) page 43

Giovanni's inner monologue is self-aware, analytical, and generally self-loathing, and it is always interesting when he drifts into imagination or dreaming.

In one case, Giovanni Drogo observes that 22 months pass at the Fort with nothing significant happening and that 22 months is enough for significant changes to take place in the normal world outside the Fort. "-- There is time for new families to be formed, for babies to be born and even begin to talk, for a great house to rise where once there was only a field, for a beautiful woman to grow old and no one desire her anymore, for an illness – for a long illness – to ripen... there is time for a man to die and be buried, for his son to be able to laugh again and in the evenings take the girls down the avenues and past the cemetery gates without a thought."⁷ Drogo's plight, of spending years in this fort, is becoming very dramatic and loathing. These 22 months are dramatized and exponentiated to greater, deeper, and darker themes.

This is when he has a dream involving Angustina, a lieutenant at the fort, when they are both children, in a cryptic sequence with phantoms and symbolic figures like something from *Fantasia*. "So the phantoms, which had seemed so friendly, had not come to play with the moonbeams, they had not come like innocent creatures from scented gardens, but derived from the abyss."⁸

Drogo's emotions sway from envy to loss as he watches the spirit of his friend carried away by these apparitions. In looking for themes and indications of Drogo's character, we see some dramatization, mood swings and a little bit of selfishness as he is nearly jealous of the attention Angustina's spirit gets from these little grim reapers before he realizes that Angustina is dead and it's his spirit finally departing in this dream. His sense of loss of time and feeling in these 22 months is a dramatization of what people can often experience when serving in the military, as will be explored in the last section.

Captain Angustina later dies on a mountaintop, and there is a hint that he is carried away by these spirits on the litter that Giovanni witnessed in his dream. Yet, it's a pointless death. He freezes on the mountaintop playing cards. It was his idea to play cards and he lingered there while everyone else sought warmth.

Prosdocimo the tailor also has a dream. He is imagining that there is an invasion, that soldiers are marching towards the fort. "In a dream things are never crystal clear and real, like that desolate plain over which columns of unknown men were advancing." In part, it's a joke, because he too has gotten so bored and disconnected that he sees this like a great, happy event, that he must be dead or dreaming before the sergeant major touches his arm and breaks him from this dream.

Also comically, the soldiers on guard are constantly hypothesizing what specs of movement they see in the distance through their telescopes might be doing. Presumably, they are building roads for an invasion or massing for war. This leaves us wondering exactly what is real or not in this fictional fort and kingdom, but also giving more weight to the themes and emotions than the actual events.

⁷ (Buzzati, 2005 (orig 1940)) page 64

⁸ (Buzzati, 2005 (orig 1940)) page 67

Military Service and Psychology

Giovanni Drogo's personal experience serving in the Steppes waiting for an enemy to come from the northern mists to wage war is tragic and full of personal loss. What I think is missing from some interpretations of the book is that this is part of military service. Sacrifices are made. Relationships are disrupted. And many years of somebody's life can go by while they are in their prime. They may want glory or some kind of action as Dino does, as that's what they were trained and committed to do, or they may want some personal gain or pleasure that Giovanni Drogo misses out on while standing guard on the Steppes for 30 years. He wants a pension. He wants some success, some acknowledgement. These are very human desires even though Giovanni's inner monologue becomes very tragic and loathing. That's his story and his character but not necessarily the only thing happening in the story.

Giovanni Drogo's interaction with his mother and friend Maria when he takes leave from the Steppes is awkward, not all he had hoped it would be, then he just goes back to the fort for years and years. It is an extreme dramatization, but a reflection of something that is real for people who serve in the military.

Comically, and tragically, Giovanni is dragged away from his post as a Major after 30 years guarding the same corridor from what had been presented by a threat that was irrational and impossible. Here we see his personal emotions. He is afraid to be seen as sickly and unimportant, of missing the war and gaining recognition, of having been personally involved in guarding the post but missing the part that is more intrinsic to the purpose of guarding it – an invasion.

"Deployments are complicated, with experiences that can be damaging and rewarding. The fear of missing out is characterized by regret and anxiety that others might be having rewarding experiences without you."⁹ From an article in *Psychology Today*, here is a description of a similar experience in 2020. Once Giovanni was no longer an outsider, and had gotten deeply involved in the fort and the people there, he is experiencing loss and regret from not getting a chance to justify his time, rather than dwelling on earthly things like love or money any longer. He also fears the judgment of his peers more than, for example, embracing that he can finally leave the fort and retire.

Buzzati makes a point to show Giovanni Drogo's experience interacting with his mother and childhood interest Maria after he had spent four years at the fort. "... he had a vague feeling of disappointment and coldness,"¹⁰ even though Maria and his mother had remained the same. "...something had indeed come between them, an obscure indefinable veil which would not dissolve."¹¹

From an article, *Military and Emotional Intelligence*, "many who have served find themselves disconnected from friends and family due to the intensity and severity of their experiences."¹² This is simple and widely accepted, but it is still remarkable that this book from 1940 shows these themes that are still very common and ubiquitous today.

⁹ (Mobbs, 2020)

¹⁰ (Buzzati, 2005 (orig 1940)) page 129

¹¹ (Buzzati, 2005 (orig 1940)) page 130

¹² (Jerus, 2015)

Conclusion

The fun of deep reading and analyzing a book like this is that you are not explicitly told what to think. There's themes and things to interpret and feel while you're reading them. There is some extra significance to this fictional story and allegory because of when it was written, but I can't pretend to know the context of what Buzzati's beliefs were in 1938 after the world experienced World War I, or what Italians or people in Milan may have thought of their government, the state of its military, or the plausibility of one kind of war or another in the near future. The story doesn't necessarily have to do with any of that, but the timing is worth noting for anybody reading the book.

The personal themes, outside of any critique of military life or customs, are very clear. The character of Giovanni Drogo gets into a greater and greater state of regret and bitterness for not having gotten what he wanted in life, both before and after experiencing some indoctrination into the fort, so much so that the final moments are comical. He once wanted normal civilian things, then some adaptation of military things, then at the very end some impossible sense of glory that he just misses out on. The psychology that happens in the book, the transition from a civilian with tangible and reasonable wants dealing with experiencing the military, to someone who serves so long that they experience disconnect and indoctrination and a loss of the experience of their own life and unrealistic goals of glory is a human one and one you can find relatable in people who have served in real militaries. That the emotions and psychology is so human and relatable is remarkable.

Works Cited

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