



WOMEN, MORALITY AND SOCIETY IN TOLSTOY'S *ANNA KARENINA*

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Abstract

Tolstoy's 1878's novel *Anna Karenina* is one of the most studied novels in the world literature. It questions the place of women in the society, the moral choices they make and their consequences in return they get, are still, even today, a pressing issue in the society. The novel opens with an epigraph from Saint Paul which declares that the power of judgment belongs to God alone, but society harshly imposes this authority upon Anna. This paper argues, through close reading and feminist literary analysis, that the structural imbalance of Oblonsky's infidelity and Anna's punishment is fundamental to the novel's design. It's not incidental. In the novel, the parallel narrative of Konstantin Levin provides a contrast to the moral quest of the male characters, and this contrast makes the possibility of moral growth for men, but denied entirely to women.

Keywords: *Anna Karenina*, Leo Tolstoy, women and morality, Russian society, gender and literature, moral consciousness, nineteenth-century fiction

Introduction

Tolstoy opens *Anna Karenina* with one of the most quoted sentences in all of fiction: "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way" (Tolstoy, pt. 1, ch. 1). The line arrives with the confidence of a proverb, yet it announces something genuinely unsettling about the novel that follows. It places unhappiness at the centre of things, and it insists, quietly but firmly, on the singularity of each instance of suffering. The novel that follows is indeed a study in singular suffering. It is also a study in the social forces that produce that suffering, and specifically in how those forces operate on women in ways they never quite operate on men.

The novel unfolds in Russian high society in the 1870s, a world governed by strict codes of conduct, especially for women, codes that have very little to do with genuine moral feeling and a great deal to do with appearances and the preservation of social order. Anna Oblonsky



Karenina, married to a senior government official, falls in love with the cavalry officer Count Vronsky and leaves her husband. The social consequences are immediate and total. She is shut out of respectable society, denied meaningful access to her son, and eventually destroyed. Vronsky, the man she loves, survives the affair with his social standing largely intact. Her husband survives. Her brother Stiva Oblonsky, who opened the novel in the midst of his own infidelity, suffers no real consequences at all. Only Anna does not survive.

This paper argues that Tolstoy uses Anna's story to expose a structural flaw in his society's moral reasoning: it punishes women for acts that men perform without consequence. But the argument here goes further than that familiar observation. Tolstoy is not simply a critic standing outside this system and pointing at its failures. He is himself implicated in the judgment his novel passes on Anna, and the tension between his evident sympathy for her and the moral framework his narrative ultimately endorses is what makes Anna Karenina genuinely complex rather than merely sad. Understanding this tension, and what it reveals about how morality is constructed along the lines of gender, is the central aim of this paper.

Literature Review

The critical literature on Anna Karenina is extensive, and it divides, broadly speaking, into two orientations: those who read Anna as a morally compromised figure whose destruction carries a kind of justice, and those who read her as a victim of social structures that are themselves the greater moral failure. These are not, of course, mutually exclusive readings, and the richest scholarship tends to hold both in tension simultaneously.

R.F. Christian's foundational study established many of the critical coordinates for subsequent work. Reading the novel as structured around competing moral worldviews, Christian observed that Tolstoy's narrative voice is never neutral (Christian 166). He argued that Tolstoy was genuinely torn between his sympathy for Anna as a living, feeling human being and his philosophical conviction that sexual passion divorced from family duty leads, with something like moral inevitability, to ruin. This duality has remained a persistent feature of the critical tradition, and it is productive precisely because it mirrors the tension within the novel itself.

Amy Mandelker's *Framing Anna Karenina* brought feminist literary theory to bear on the novel in a sustained and illuminating way. Mandelker argued that Tolstoy's treatment of Anna is shaped by his inheritance of Victorian moral conventions and that the novel's engagement with the "woman question" cannot be separated from questions of artistic representation, specifically from how women are seen, framed, and ultimately judged by a narrative gaze that



is inescapably gendered (Mandelker 53). Her work demonstrated that the formal choices Tolstoy makes, including how he constructs Anna's interiority relative to other characters, are themselves ideological acts that carry moral weight.

Gary Saul Morson's "Anna Karenina" in *Our Time* offers perhaps the most morally serious engagement with the novel from a perspective broadly sympathetic to Tolstoy's own values. Morson argues that Anna's tragedy is substantially a tragedy of self-deception, that she constructs a narrative about her love for Vronsky with such thoroughness that she loses touch with the moral reality surrounding her (Morson 94). This argument is a valuable corrective to purely sociological readings, which risk turning Anna into a simple victim and thereby flattening the novel's genuine moral complexity. At the same time, Morson's emphasis on Anna's self-deception can, if pursued too exclusively, occlude the degree to which the conditions of her life make self-deception almost inevitable.

Donna Tussing Orwin's study of Tolstoy's art and thought places Anna Karenina within the context of his evolving philosophical concerns, arguing that the novel is shaped by his deep engagement with questions of freedom, determinism, and moral responsibility (Orwin 184). Orwin's work is essential for grasping why Tolstoy can neither simply condemn nor simply excuse Anna: she functions in the novel as a test case for his most pressing beliefs about human agency and its limits. What these studies have not fully addressed, however, is the precise structural asymmetry between the moral fates of men and women across the novel as a whole, and it is this asymmetry that the present paper sets out to examine.

Methodology

This paper employs close reading as its primary critical method, attending carefully to specific moments in the text where the novel's treatment of women's morality becomes most visible and most pressured. Close reading of literary fiction, when it takes seriously both the craft of a text and its ideological implications, is one of the most powerful instruments literary scholarship possesses. It is particularly well suited to a novel as intricately organized as Anna Karenina, where structural parallels, contrasts, and ironies carry much of the argument. Alongside close reading, the paper draws on feminist literary criticism, specifically the strand that attends to how literary texts construct gender as a social and moral category rather than as a natural given. This approach asks whose moral judgments a text endorses, whose freedoms it permits, and whose inner lives it grants full visibility. These two methods are used together rather than in sequence. Close reading supplies the observations; feminist criticism provides the framework



within which those observations become arguments. The paper does not impose a predetermined conclusion on the text but allows the text's own complexities to generate the reading that emerges.

Analysis and Findings

The novel opens not with Anna but with her brother, Stiva Oblonsky, who has been discovered by his wife in an affair with their children's French governess. Tolstoy describes Oblonsky's response to this discovery with a mixture of light irony and something approaching affectionate understanding. Oblonsky is embarrassed by the situation, but he cannot genuinely feel guilty for what seemed to him entirely natural. His social world, after a brief and awkward period, essentially agrees with him. By the close of Part One, Oblonsky has moved back into something like his normal life, and his infidelity has been absorbed into the social fabric as a minor and forgivable disruption (Tolstoy, pt. 1, ch. 2). This is the novel's first pronouncement on the question of moral standards, and it is delivered with a clarity that careful readers cannot miss: for men of Oblonsky's class, a sexual liaison outside marriage is an inconvenience, not a catastrophe. Anna enters this world as Oblonsky's guest, traveling from St. Petersburg to help repair her brother's marriage, and the contrast between what her society forgives in him and what it will demand of her once she follows a comparable desire constitutes the novel's central irony. When Anna meets Vronsky at the Moscow railway station in Part One, Tolstoy renders her consciousness with extraordinary precision. She does not fall into infatuation easily or thoughtlessly. She is aware of something happening in her, aware of an attraction that carries danger, and she makes a series of choices that are morally considered in a way Oblonsky's casual philandering never is (Morson 92). This is among Tolstoy's most demanding insights: Anna's moral awareness is actually far greater than her brother's, yet it is Anna who will be annihilated.

The asymmetry here is the novel's argument. It reveals something precise about how moral responsibility is distributed in this social world. Oblonsky's lack of self-examination protects him. Anna's heightened consciousness, her refusal to pretend that what she is doing means nothing, marks her as a threat to the social order. A woman who knows what she wants and acts on it, who takes her own inner life seriously enough to reorganize her entire existence around it, is more disturbing to this society than a man who drifts through his desires without ever subjecting them to serious thought. Society does not punish Oblonsky's conduct because it does not, in any real sense, notice it. It punishes Anna's choice because Anna makes visible what the



social code depends on keeping invisible: that its rules are not moral principles but instruments of control, applied selectively and almost exclusively to women.

The figure of Kitty Shcherbatsky complicates this picture in important ways. Kitty is the young woman Levin loves, who is briefly captivated by Vronsky before he turns entirely to Anna. Kitty's suffering and her eventual happiness with Levin have sometimes been read as Tolstoy's endorsement of the conventional path for women, as evidence that the novel rewards those who stay within accepted boundaries. There is something to this reading, but it requires a qualification that matters. Kitty finds happiness because she accepts the terms her society offers, not because those terms are intrinsically just or morally superior to the ones Anna reaches for (Orwin 196). Her contentment is genuine and fully rendered, but it is purchased at the cost of self-limitation, and the novel asks us to see that cost even as it affirms the warmth and solidity of what Kitty builds with Levin. The comparison between the two women is not a competition with a clear winner. It is a map of the choices available to women in this world, and it is a deliberately constrained map. Konstantin Levin's parallel narrative is perhaps the most important structural element for understanding what Tolstoy is attempting with Anna. Levin is a man in search of meaning. He questions the purpose of his life with genuine philosophical urgency, struggles with the fear of death, wrestles with his relationship to faith, and works his way, slowly and painfully, toward a kind of moral conviction that the novel endorses without sentimentality (Christian 178). His journey is difficult and genuine. What is significant for the purposes of this paper is that Levin's moral searching is something his world can accommodate. He is thought peculiar by some of his acquaintances, but his social standing is never at risk because of his inner life. He is free to be in crisis, free to search, free to arrive somewhere new without it costing him everything he has.

Anna's inner life, by contrast, leads directly to her social destruction (Mandelker 79). This is not because Levin's questions are more important than Anna's, and it is not because his answers are better or truer. It is because the novel's social world has no framework for a woman whose consciousness exceeds the roles assigned to her. Levin's moral growth is celebrated as the development of a full human being. Anna's moral seriousness is perceived as transgression, as the dangerous refusal of a woman to contain herself within the limits that keep the social order stable. The parallel structure of their narratives makes this disparity impossible to read as accidental. It is architectural. Anna's increasing jealousy in the novel's later sections has often been cited as evidence of psychological deterioration, and Morson's argument that she becomes a progressively unreliable moral perceiver as the story advances is persuasive up to a point



(Morson 108). What this argument can understate, however, is the material situation that produces Anna's jealousy. She has left everything for Vronsky and has received nothing stable in return. She has no legal standing, no recognized social identity, no claim on her son, and no world she can inhabit without Vronsky's continued presence and goodwill. Her jealousy is not simply a character flaw emerging from a disordered personality. It is a rational, if destructive, response to a situation of complete vulnerability that her society has actively engineered for her. Reading her jealousy as evidence of moral failure, without attending to the conditions that produced it, replicates the novel's social logic rather than analysing it.

The epigraph, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord," has most commonly been read as Tolstoy's moral verdict on Anna's transgression (Mandelker 54). On this reading, Anna has violated a sacred order and will be punished by forces larger than human judgment. But the epigraph sustains a second reading that is equally available, and perhaps more challenging. If vengeance belongs to God and not to human institutions, then the punishment society inflicts on Anna is itself a form of transgression, a usurpation of divine judgment by social mechanisms that have no genuine moral authority. On this reading, Tolstoy is not endorsing what happens to Anna. He is indicting the society that makes it happen. The ambiguity is sustained throughout the novel, and it is not a weakness. It is the condition under which the novel can ask its hardest questions.

Discussion

What emerges from this reading is a picture of Tolstoy as a writer genuinely in conflict with himself over the question of women's moral agency. He grants Anna an interior life richer and more searching than that of almost any other character in the novel, yet the narrative structure ensures that precisely this richness of consciousness becomes the agent of her destruction. This is not straightforward misogyny, though elements of what we might now recognize as such are present in Tolstoy's broader thinking about women. It is something more complicated: a recognition, pursued through the formal choices of the novel itself, that in the world he is describing, moral seriousness in a woman is not rewarded but punished.

Mandelker's argument that Tolstoy's narrative gaze "frames" Anna in ways that objectify her even while appearing to sympathize is an important observation (Mandelker 81). But it does not fully account for those moments in the novel where Tolstoy seems to be working against his own assumptions, granting Anna a moral complexity that actively resists easy judgment. There is a scene in which Anna, traveling by train, reads a novel and realizes with sudden clarity



that she wants what the heroine of that novel wants: she wants to live, fully and on her own terms. Tolstoy renders this moment of self-recognition without condescension and without irony. It is one of the novel's most honest passages, and its honesty complicates any reading that would make the author simply an instrument of social judgment against his protagonist. The deeper question the novel raises, and the one that gives it its continuing power, is whether a society can be morally serious if it applies its moral categories differently based on whether the person in question is a man or a woman. Tolstoy does not answer this question directly. The entire architecture of the novel, however, makes the question unavoidable. That Oblonsky never suffers, that Vronsky survives and moves forward, that Karenin in his own way also survives, while Anna alone is destroyed, is not an accident of plot or a reflection of nineteenth-century naturalism's taste for feminine tragedy. It is the novel's argument, rendered in structure rather than in statement.

Conclusion

Anna Karenina is, among many other things, a sustained examination of what happens when a society's moral codes are applied in ways that have nothing to do with genuine morality. Anna is not simply a woman who made a series of poor choices. She is a woman who made conscious, considered choices in a world that had already decided, well before she acted, that choices of this kind in a woman must be penalized. Tolstoy's own ambivalence toward Anna, his simultaneous sympathy and moral distance, mirrors the larger cultural ambivalence that the novel documents with such precision. The novel's power is not merely historical. The structures it describes, the double standard, the restriction of women's moral and emotional lives to socially sanctioned channels, the punishment that follows when a woman's inner life exceeds the role assigned to her, remain recognizable across many contemporary contexts. What Tolstoy's novel does that few works of fiction accomplish is make these structures visible through the consciousness of a woman who sees them clearly, even as they are destroying her. That clarity is Anna's defining quality. It is also, in the world Tolstoy so faithfully renders, the quality that makes her survival impossible. Scholarship has long debated whether Tolstoy ultimately condemns or mourns Anna. The more productive question, and the one this paper has attempted to open, is what it means that these two responses are so difficult to separate from one another. The novel insists that we hold condemnation and mourning together, and in insisting on this, it asks us to examine the moral categories we bring to it. The discomfort that examination produces is not a flaw in the reading experience. It is, in the deepest sense, what the novel is designed to create.



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