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WOMEN, CHARACTER, AND SOCIETY IN TOLSTOY'S ANNA KARENINA

Gayle Greene

I am not the first reader of Anna Karenina to react with outrage and indignation at Tolstoy's treatment of Anna, nor will I be the last. Thus it may be instructive to consider why so many of us have felt the injustice of her fate, and why Tolstoy had to kill her. The purpose of this study is to explore contradictions and inconsistencies in Tolstoy's treatment of women and marriage in Anna Karenina, confusions which are the more remarkable in view of his understanding of character generally, and especially in view of his genius at portraying character in relation to society. These failures of perception on a personal, psychological level are of a piece with his failure finally to confront the implications of the social and political issues he raises. They are particularly damaging to the moral and ideological coherence of the novel because marriage is posited as so central an ideal, the saving grace and ballast against the uncertainties and confusions of a crumbling social and political order.

In some sense, of course, Tolstoy is an easy target on the subject of women. His failures are no worse than those of most nineteenth-century novelists, male or female; what is surprising, in fact, is that he understands them so well. Of all nineteenth-century novels written by men, Anna Karenina is the one most centrally concerned with women, the one which attempts most thoroughly and honestly to confront them in all aspects of their lives--or at least in as many aspects as Tolstoy can imagine--and it does succeed, to a great extent. There is much insight into the characters and positions of women in this novel. Besides creating one of the great female characters in fiction, Anna herself, Tolstoy offers a brilliant array of lesser

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portraits, including Dolly, Varenka, and the aging princesses and countesses who hover about the edges of the novel, turning in their old age to spirituality or promiscuity, or into an "enfant terrible." Having outlived the necessity of functioning as sexual objects, they can finally afford the courage of their convictions.¹ Indeed, there is in Anna Karenina more understanding of certain aspects of women's lives, certainly more honest confrontation of physicality--motherhood, sexuality, aging--than in all the works of Austen, Eliot, and the Brontes. As a Russian and a man, and because of the greater depth and daring of his vision, Tolstoy can afford to confront things which English women cannot.² But what is remarkable is that he is capable of such profound insight and empathy--in the portrayal of Dolly, for example--and yet, simultaneously, as with Anna, is guilty of a failure of understanding and sensitivity which verges on the cruel: since he offers so much, we expect more. It is this peculiar mixture of insight and blindness that I wish to explore. We can see, in Tolstoy's treatment of women, a genius grappling with a problem with his full force, yet falling back into stereotyped conceptions because emotional needs and investments interfere with understanding and sympathy, and cause him to retreat into simplistic solutions unworthy of his understanding.

That there is nothing "natural" about "human nature," that a person's character is largely the product of shaping social forces and values, is a sense we have long had in relation to man, but one which has been somewhat more difficult to grasp in relation to woman. In fiction, the understanding that, as George Eliot says, "there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it," has its origins in the novel, a bourgeois form concerned with people in their social milieu, and finds its fullest expression in the nineteenth-century novel.³ It is an idea that writers, both male and female, have been quicker to apply to men than to women, in fiction and in fact, because of strong psychological investments which both sexes have in preserving traditional notions of the nature of woman. (It is agonizing, as Simone de Beauvoir says, for any being to assume responsibility for its own destiny, and woman is sanctioned, encouraged, and pressured by society to relinquish such responsibility [pp. xxi, 278, 606].) De Beauvoir wrote The Second Sex to argue this idea of woman: "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature" (p. 249). There are indeed certain traits which may be called "feminine," in that they characterize women generally, and which do indeed render her inferior to man as an autonomous being; but these traits are no more inherent than the shape of a bound foot. "Woman" is the product of a long process of learning and tradition, a whole complex of assumptions and expectations, that work

on her from the moment of birth, finally resulting in the creature we know as woman--feminine, passive, instinctive, emotional, undeveloped intellectually, and crippled as a self-determining functioning individual.⁴ That this idea still needed to be argued in 1949 (indeed, is not yet fully understood), says much; but that it was not beyond the scope of a nineteenth-century male novelist is shown by Stendhal, who offers as an analogy for the way women are understood the example of the man walking in the Versailles Gardens who concluded that "judging from all he saw, the trees grow ready trimmed."⁵

There is no novelist greater than Tolstoy at understanding the relation of the individual life to that of the community. He, of all nineteenth-century novelists, best understood humans as social creatures and portrayed them in integral relation to a social system and hierarchy which is thoroughly rendered and is as central a subject of this novel as any. Tolstoy is relentless in his exposure of a decadent and declining civilization, and without exception, his male characters are defined in terms of their functions and positions in it. On all levels--personal, social, and political--this is a society ripe for scourging, on the edge of the abyss. We see the cynicism and shallowness of its personal and sexual relationships, the sham of its conventions and morality; this is a society in which adultery is only condemned if it is not kept casual. The same hypocrisy that characterizes people's personal lives pervades their political beings-- Oblonsky's self-serving political views, for example: "The Liberal Party said that marriage was an obsolete institution which ought to be reformed; and family life really gave Oblonsky very little pleasure, forcing him to tell lies and dissemble, which was quite contrary to his nature" (p. 6). We see the complacency of the czarist bureaucracy, its distance from the people, its ineffectuality and insensitivity in dealing with the problems of Russia. Generally speaking, the more comfortably integrated into this society a character is, the higher in its hierarchy and the more accepting of its assumptions and values, the less a human being--or man--he is for it. Those who accept what society deals them by way of values or work, are lost; manhood is measured by the ability to free oneself from external strictures and social conventions and to define the self and one's work from within. Manhood is the ability to find significant work, work which can only be created by the individual, since what society offers is demeaning.

Karenin and Koznyshev occupy the most prestigious positions, move in the highest social circles in the novel, and are the furthest removed from their feelings and least capable of love. Karenin takes seriously the "paper world"⁶ in which he functions, high in the czarist bureaucracy; his work, consisting of reports on reports (p. 337), is as far removed from the problems of the people as he is from his heart. He has sacrificed his inner life to professional ambition, and it is dead,

to be revived briefly as he rises to a blessed state of true feeling and forgiveness of Anna in the scene where she seems likely to die. But this new life of the heart cannot be reborn because the Christian virtues of compassion and forgiveness have no place in the life of this society, and Karenin's new feelings earn him only laughter and contempt. The course of his development after this scene demonstrates more clearly than any other character's, the crushing weight of social opinion and convention on a human life. Koznyshev, more an intellectual and less a bureaucrat than Karenin, cuts a more independent path in applying his mind to the solution of Russia's problems, but again, he demonstrates, in both his personal and professional life, a dominance of the head over the life of the heart. What makes Levin uncomfortable about his half-brother is that his notions of "the people," like his ideas about nature and the country, all come from the head; Levin realizes that this is what makes him uncomfortable about social reformers generally--their endeavors are the result of reasoned principles, not feeling or direct experience of the people. The futility of Koznyshev's intellectual endeavors is clear at the end of the novel, in the fate of his book which nobody notices ("the result of six years' labor . . ." [p. 695]), and is integrally related to his failure of feeling with regard to Varenka. Summoning all the reasons he can for why he should marry her, he cannot make them add up to a feeling of love, and he fails at the crucial moment.

Oblonsky dabbles in the same work Karenin takes seriously, but because he only dabbles in it, he is better than Karenin. Though the superficiality with which he approaches his work and holds his political views is of a piece with his casual adulteries, still, the refusal to take seriously such work salvages for him a certain integrity. Though he practices deception, it is repugnant to his nature, whereas Karenin, steeped in social convention and artificiality, does not know the difference between deception and truth; falsehood is the very stuff of his nature. Vronsky, "a very fine sample of the gilded youth of Petersburg" (p. 36), also moves in the highest social circles and is proportionately low on the human scale; and again, his human stature is one with the work he does--or does not do. A professional soldier, he passes the time in peacetime gambling, horse-racing, and drinking. His unprincipled code and behavior are one with his idleness: men are what they do.

Levin is the only character in the novel who does man's work. Assuming responsibility for his estate, he works directly with the people, reads, experiments; refusing to accept prescribed ways of doing things, he sets out to find new methods and to apply them to the problems of his estate and society. Because he insists on defining his work and himself from within, according to original principles, he is a social misfit, a country rustic who is awkward and uncomfortable in urban society and who does not know how to pass his time in the city. The scene in which Karenin nearly throws him out of his railway

compartment, mistaking him for a peasant in his sheepskin coat, is emblematic of their respective relations to society, and as Karenin's conventionality diminishes his human stature, Levin's nonconformism augments his, and assures his survival as a human being. There is in Tolstoy a sense of the integration of the parts of a man's life that is an aspect of the health and wholeness of his vision: a striving for integrity, a sense of the relation of the parts of a life. A man's position--but not a woman's--in society, his work, is his life, love, and mind.

There is evidence in the novel that on some level, Tolstoy grasped that the same principles of behavior which shape men's characters apply to women's as well: that a woman is what she does; lives up or down to the functions and expectations assigned her; and what is expected of her, feels even more heavily than man the weight of social pressures which work on and warp character. Dolly is one of the most brilliantly portrayed and thoroughly understood characters in the novel--probably because Tolstoy has less emotional investment in her than in the central female characters and needs neither to embrace her as ideal nor kill her as adulteress. We know her thoroughly. She is, though Tolstoy does not stress this, the true daughter of her parents: a silly mother who prefers the dashing Vronsky as suitor for Kitty over the solid Levin, and her father, the old Prince Shcherbatsky, who is at least able to know a cad when he sees one, though he expresses the most casual condescension toward women in the discussion of women's rights at the Oblonsky's dinner party (pp. 353-56). We know of the narrowness of Dolly's education; she tells Anna, "You know how I was married. With the education Mamma gave me, I was not merely naive but silly. I knew nothing. . . . You will hardly believe it, but up to now I thought I was the only woman he had ever known" (p. 62). We see her now, "nothing but an excellent mother of a family," exhausted from repeated pregnancies, "worn out, already growing elderly, no longer pretty, and in no way remarkable, in fact, quite an ordinary woman" (p. 3) for her years in the nursery. Her husband, though a year older than she, feels perfectly justified in turning to younger women. That she is not "remarkable" is clearly understandable in terms of her life; she is, as de Beauvoir terms it, "victim of the reproductive cycle."⁷ Tolstoy understands, with regard to Dolly, that a woman is what she does, that what this woman does has prohibited her development as an individual; but while he shows sympathy for her plight, he approves it.

In the argument over women's rights at the Oblonsky's dinner party (pp. 353-55), Pestov articulates the social issues underlying Dolly's plight--though neither he nor she makes the connection between his views and her miseries. He claims that woman is what she is because of her education, and if she were taught differently, she could occupy positions for which she is now unfit. Pestov also argues that the most unfair pressure on woman is the double standard of morality, by which woman is

punished for sexual transgression more harshly than man, both by law and opinion. The novel gives abundant evidence of this double standard, as seen in Vronsky's code before he becomes involved with Anna, which holds that one may lie to a woman but not to a man (p. 278), and in society's treatment of Anna after she becomes involved with Vronsky. Tolstoy demonstrates other pressures women have to endure, including men's attitudes toward them, in the predatory quality of Vronsky's trifling with Kitty (p. 55), and the casual and unfeeling contempt of even a kindly man like the old Prince. One also sees, in the unhinged quality of the older women in this novel, what becomes of aging women in a leisured society when they have outlived their sexual roles and have no other.⁸

But it is at this point, at an understanding of the social dimension of woman's "nature," that Tolstoy draws up short, refusing to go further. Though the social factors behind women's lives and characters are everywhere suggested, Tolstoy refuses to bring to full consciousness a sense of woman's character and situation as socially determined. He refuses to follow through on the implications of his insights and withdraws sympathy and understanding at the most crucial places: Anna is tragically doomed and Levin able to live and find meaning. Thus for all his highly developed sense of man's character in relation to work and position, of the warping and deadening weight of social convention on the life of a man, Tolstoy insists, with regard to women, that "the trees grow clipped."

Position and function in society, which vary greatly among Tolstoy's men, are defined uniformly for women: they are wives and mothers. If a woman is not fortunate enough to marry, her one alternative is to do the same work, caring for others, in someone else's family--as Kitty has learned from her brush with spinsterhood and from knowing Varenka. The humiliation of such a situation is something Kitty understands and communicates to Levin (p. 361), but while Tolstoy shows sympathy for Varenka's plight--her life is not easy--he approves of the social and moral scheme that determines it. Women are another order of being, idolized on the one hand, but closer to the animal and instinctive on the other hand--never quite people, never understood from within. It is just barely realized that they have inner lives at all, and their only thoughts concern their men or children. Only once does a woman philosophize about anything more general--Anna's annihilating pronouncements at the end, which Tolstoy is concerned to show as desperately mistaken. Levin's remark about Koznyshev is without irony--"I feel that for him they are simply human beings, not women" (p. 507)--and it is remarkable that Tolstoy himself can believe they are "women," not "human beings," when he himself has created several who belie this trend.

There is often in Tolstoy, as in other nineteenth-century novelists (most notably, Dickens and Dostoevsky), a discrepancy between what the writer seemingly intends to do and what he actually accomplishes, which may be traced to a discrepancy between what the mind can accept and approve and what the imagination apprehends and renders artistically. I am not the first to sense this in Tolstoy; in a way, I am following the line of criticism begun by D. H. Lawrence, who also expressed indignation at Tolstoy's treatment of Anna, on somewhat the same grounds as my own--that Tolstoy the moralist had to kill the woman that Tolstoy the artist had created so lovingly.⁹ Tolstoy himself provides justification for this approach because of certain remarks he made about his way of writing: he once said that his characters assumed lives of their own and went their own ways, regardless of his initial intentions regarding them.¹⁰ We know of the changes Anna went through, how she evolved from an evil (and ugly) adulteress, into a far more winning and sympathetic character than Tolstoy knew how to accommodate to his initial plan, smashing her way through his moral scheme, though destroyed for it. In some sense, this creative process is true to his sense that feeling is capable of apprehending a higher truth than reason, and we owe the greatness of his novels to his consistency in this matter at least.

Interestingly enough, Tolstoy is open to this criticism from a number of different angles. The Soviet critic Bychkov attacks him for his failure to follow out the implications of his perceptions about society.¹¹ Having exposed the decadence of this society, in which the upper classes are criminally cut off from the people, he has his hero turn his back on these problems and find a purely personal salvation in the country: "These considerations of the importance of the Slavonic element seemed to him [Levin] so insignificant in comparison with what was going on in his soul" (p. 736). The obvious solution to the problems Tolstoy portrays is a radical reorganization of society such as would actually occur; his imagination grasps and presents problems to which revolution is the obvious answer, but his understanding balks short of confronting these implications. The best solution Levin can come up with, for all his thought and concern for the people, is "an ideal of concord and universal brotherhood," brought about by a "bloodless revolution but immense" (p. 314). Society should retain the same structure, but everyone should work harder, spend less, be good (p. 85); landlords should be kinder to their workers, those who have power should exercise it more gently.

On all grounds--personal, social, political, and ethical--Tolstoy retreats. Though his perceptions and criticisms are radical, he withdraws into traditional values, offering simplistic answers to complex, far-ranging questions. He retreats, in the

face of a bewildering and changing society, to ancient institutions and attitudes; both literally and figuratively, he retires to the country. Factories, cities, even railroads, are pernicious; the book reeks, as Turgenev says, of slavophilism.¹² Tolstoy insists that Russia is an exception to the nineteenth century and rejects western methods and values (pp. 312-14); he would undo the Industrial Revolution, if he could, or stop it at the Russian borders. Kitty's mother's bewilderment at changing marriage customs is Tolstoy's as well; so is Levin's bemoaning of the loss of the old agrarian order and values and the emergence of cities and railroads to take people to them (pp. 439-40; 595-96). The moral scheme of the book involves a similar retreat into conventional values. The epigraph, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay," repeated at the beginning of Book I and again at the beginning of Book II, suggests that the law Anna dies for violating is more than a social law; it is absolute and divine. (Although, in the actual working of the world of the novel, what we see her die for is social and psychological retribution--the pressure of social opinion from without, and guilt from within.) Salvation, like damnation, also involves traditional Christian values--love, faith, and forgiveness. The ability to forgive and feel compassion nearly saves Karenin, and Levin's revelation at the end involves an entirely Christian doctrine, love of God.

On all levels, Tolstoy shows more than he knows, and turns his back just short of comprehension; on all levels, imagination renders a dazzling complexity and range of problems, but the mind withdraws to conventional solutions based more on desire than on the full grasp and comprehension of his genius. And we are justified in feeling dissatisfied because it is he who has raised these problems in the first place: had he offered less, we would expect less.

It is not surprising, then, to encounter the same retreat from the implications of what he knows in his treatment of women--especially here. Against the confusions of a changing society, the ideal of home and family is posited as a bulwark. Levin's ideal is to retire to his country estate and make of the home a whole world, as his parents did before him (p. 86). But it is difficult to retire to the country and make the home a whole world if one is alone in it; Levin tries this for a while after Kitty refuses his proposal, and he fails miserably. Hence, Tolstoy needs to believe in the blessing of matrimony and children, needs to see woman as he does. The ideal depends on a conception of woman as a creature suited to being happy in this place, bearing and raising children, tending home and hearth, appearing when needed and disappearing when in the way. Thus Tolstoy cannot afford to understand women in the way he understands men, to confront them as independent beings; his conception of the "nature" of women is dictated by need.

But this ideal is doomed precisely because of what it requires of the woman, because it does not allow her human

status, or acknowledge her existence as an independent being. There are numerous parallels between the marriage which is posited as the ideal and the other two relationships, both the compromise settled on by Oblonsky and Dolly and the tragic adultery of Anna and Vronsky, which cast a shadow on the ideal. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion, though Tolstoy himself seems to have avoided it, that the same elements which turn one to compromise and the other to tragedy will undermine the ideal. But even closer to home, there are weaknesses within the marriage itself: what we see happening to Kitty and Levin in the first days after their marriage indicates the course it will take. There are differences in their ages, educations, backgrounds, and intelligence which already, within the novel, result in a parting of the ways, and point the direction to the end.

No writer is sharper than Tolstoy in understanding men's inability to understand women--and at exposing male obtuseness as deliberate and self-serving. None of the male characters in Anna Karenina understands women, precisely because they see women as it suits their purposes. Oblonsky's insensitivity to the "simple, so he thought" (p. 2) Dolly, is motivated by the need not to confront his own immorality; he assumes the right to her forgiveness because he is still an attractive man. Oblonsky's tastes in women incline to the "mysterious" type--preferring the mystery of woman to her human reality--and he takes special pleasure in the mystery of fallen women (p. 148). Karenin's refusal to confront Anna as an independent being is similarly self-serving; to consider the human being within her, to question whether she is capable of loving another, would force him to confront his own failure to love and understand her (pp. 129-31). Then there is Vronsky's failure. Events of the novel succeed in stripping him of his simplistic and amoral code, leaving him no way of confronting the complexities of his life. Vronsky's problem is that he becomes involved with a woman more complex and various than he could have predicted, and his insensitivity to her nature causes him awkwardly and ineptly to destroy her--as he does his mare. He encounters a human being who cannot be accounted for by his superficial code, with its double standards--in somewhat the same way, actually, that Tolstoy does. Poor Vronsky is in some sense a more tragic victim than Anna, since he is left living at the end, with his aching teeth; vengeance is, actually, hers.¹³

Thus Karenin, Oblonsky, and Vronsky are unable--or unwilling--to understand woman, to see her as a being who exists apart from their wishes or desires. (Significantly, the only male character who does see women as "simply human beings, not women"--Koznyshev--is incapable of loving them,) The attitudes of most of the male characters are steeped in illusion, willfully blind; however, somehow, Levin is exempted from the general rule. But when we look to Levin, we see the same confusions, the same self-serving stereotypes as in the others--

only the more disturbing, because Levin is the moral center of the book, and because we suspect that Tolstoy is not very clear about his confusions. Enraptured by Kitty's whole family, Levin is not very particular about which of the sisters he finally marries. Like Oblonsky, Levin is attracted to the mystery of woman, though of the innocent, not the fallen kind; in fact, he is repelled by fallen women, and cannot understand Oblonsky's attraction to them. What attracts him to Kitty is her childlike quality (p. 26); women are to him an "enchanted and holy ideal" (p. 87), "wrapped in some mystic poetic veil" behind which he imagines "the loftiest feelings and every possible perfection" (pp. 19-20). His abhorrence of fallen women is belied by his response to the actual "fallen woman" he meets toward the end of the novel. Like Vronsky, in his one encounter with Anna, a simplistic code is proved inadequate by the complexity of an actual woman--the same woman. However, this is something he gives no thought to in those final musings about the meaning of life, which, for all the love of humanity they show, are strangely impersonal. Again, we can see the same contradiction in Tolstoy himself, who loved mankind more than individual men, and also did not give much thought to what Anna's character and actions implied for the scheme of the novel: he states a rule to which she proves a remarkable exception, but does not seem to take notice, and certainly does not modify the rule.

Kitty is posited as the ideal creature with whom Levin will retire to the country to live out his days in relative happiness--though he will not make the error of seeking all his fulfillment from her, as she will from him. He will have much else besides--work, God, philosophy; she, in turn, will have him and the children. The ideal she represents is best displayed in her behavior at Nicholas' deathbed. Levin is astonished at what she knows; he knows he is more intelligent than she, that he knows more about death philosophically, but she knows just what to do to make the dying man comfortable and cares for him with instinctive understanding and compassion. Life-giving, nurturing, administering to birth and death, she is one kind of being and he is another; relegated to separate and unequal spheres of existence, one aspires to meaning and God and the other is bound to the perpetuation of the species. In de Beauvoir's terms, one aspires to "transcendence," while the other is confined to "immanence" (p. 58).

We know quite a bit about Kitty, partly from what we know of Dolly. Sisters in soul as well as in blood, they have the same parents--the same silly mother and condescending father--the same backgrounds and educations. Kitty is presumably more mature than Dolly when she marries; she has been through the experience with Vronsky, which has forced her into some soul-searching. There is supposedly some volition and self-knowledge in her choice of marriage as a life--but hers is hardly the harrowing struggle of Levin or Anna, and her self-knowledge consists only of understanding that marriage is the one option

open to her. Jilted by her first suitor, she accepts the second, and moves from the home of her father to the home of her husband. She is nearly without inner life; her only musings concern husband and home.

When her "mystic poetic veil" is lifted, Levin finds not the exalted nature he had expected, but a limited creature whose preoccupations irrevocably divide them: she reads no books, has no interests other than housekeeping, and her childlike delight in sweets and puddings has a limited charm, even to him. He is impatient with her in a matter of months. He blames this, rightly, on her education: "It was the fault of her bringing up, which was too superficial and frivolous" (p. 441). Tolstoy excuses it on the grounds that she is awaiting "the greatest event in a woman's life" (p. 640), "where at one and the same time she would be her husband's wife, the mistress of the house, and a bearer and nurturer and educator of her children . . . she knew it instinctively" (p. 442). Levin's mystical notion of woman suffers a shock--again, a stereotype is proved inadequate--but rather than readjusting his idea of woman to fit the human reality, we see him instead, in the last pages, turning to other matters, to God and his work. Already within the novel Kitty and Levin are growing apart, as she becomes immersed in motherhood and he continues his search for meaning. At the end of the novel, after his new insights into the meaning of life, he turns to Kitty intending to communicate them, but seeing that she is occupied with arranging the nursery, keeps silent--a silence which is eloquent. Nor would this be so serious a problem in another novel, but so much depends upon marriage in Anna Karenina, where the ideal of marriage and the family is the one saving grace--and so much depends upon this particular marriage, the ideal represented by Kitty and Levin--that this flaw is serious indeed.

The ideal is further undermined by parallels between this marriage and the other two relationships, and the inevitable implication that the elements which doom two relationships will ultimately doom the third. The main difference between Kitty and Dolly is Kitty's youth and luck in a husband (and it is luck, since she would have chosen Vronsky). Dolly, musing on her own sad lot the day she travels to see Anna in the country, in one of the most poignant passages in the book, reflects that even pretty little Kitty was looking older and worn after her pregnancy; in ten years, there will not be much to differentiate them. Given their similarities, then, what will prevent this marriage from becoming like the compromise marriage of the Oblonskys? The only real difference is in the moral stature of the husbands: Levin sees no reason to steal a roll when one has ample dinner (p. 37), and sees no charm in mysterious fallen women. But Kitty is still young, beautiful, and mysterious herself, and if Levin experiences disenchantment at this early stage, what will he feel when she is Dolly's age, worn out with repeated pregnancies, duller and narrower in her preoccupations,

and fretted to nervous hysteria by numerous children? We can only imagine that even if Levin does hold to his monogamous ideals, he will spend more time out of the house, as Tolstoy himself did. The author finally fled, in the hope that death would "release us both from the dreadful atmosphere in which we have been living and to which I will not return."¹⁴

Thus Tolstoy offers as his solution to the problem of women the same benign paternalism he offers as a solution to the social problem: those who have power should exercise it more gently and be good. As landlords should be kinder to their workers, husbands should be nicer to their wives. Tolstoy presents ample evidence within the novel that this ideal will not work, but he does not modify the ideal to fit the reality. He refuses to apply what he knows about one marriage to an understanding of the other--or to the tragic plight of Anna herself. Although there are answers within the novel to the questions he poses, solutions to the issues he raises, he fails to bring the strands of his thought together.

iii

Even more incriminating than the parallels between the ideal marriage of Levin and Kitty and the compromise of Oblonsky and Dolly are the parallels between the ideal marriage and the tragic, adulterous relationship of Anna and Vronsky. The opening chapters of the second book alternate between the first days of each relationship; Kitty and Levin's wedding, honeymoon, and first months of marriage are presented with Anna and Vronsky's trip to Italy--presumably to show a contrast between the two, but actually revealing some striking similarities. Just after their love is consummated, Anna tells Vronsky of her dependence on him ("I have nothing but you left. Remember that" [p. 136]), and the story of their love is the working out of the tragic implications of this dependence and its crushing weight. At first, just after they escape to Italy, they delight in possessing one another; then he, and even she, begins to be restless. Vronsky needs something to do; he dabbles in art, fails at that; she misses her son. They return to Russia, but things are no better there, since they are still confined to one another's company. Hoping to find freedom and fulfillment, they find instead boredom and confinement; theirs is the monotony of an eternal honeymoon, an increasingly stifling atmosphere--the dependence of the woman, the restlessness of the man, and finally his desire to escape. Concentrating everything on Vronsky, Anna demands too much; she has no other means of fulfillment. Vronsky is helpless in the face of her irrational jealousy, and though she realizes, "I am growing passionate and egocentric. My life centers on him, and he is growing away" (p. 690), she cannot control it. Their attempt to make a whole world of one another fails.

But Kitty, like Anna, also has nothing but Levin: "the

whole of her life, all her desires and hopes, were concentrated on this one man" (p. 411). Kitty shows potential for every bit as much possessiveness and dependence as Anna; her first quarrel with Levin occurs when he stays away half an hour longer than he had promised. Neither woman can conceive of anything other than a vicarious fulfillment. After the third month of idleness, Levin is irritable, chafing to get back to work, and blaming her for his inability to do so. The scene in which they are sitting together in the evening with Levin trying to concentrate on work, and Kitty concentrating on the back of his neck in order to get him to turn around and look at her, is brilliant; she thinks of nothing but him and the house, and he needs work besides. But Kitty and Levin are allowed to make a world of the home and to find legitimate work, because she will have babies and leave him alone, whereas Vronsky will be stifled by a woman who is desperately unhappy because she is not bearing and raising children.

Quite simply, Kitty is worthy of life and saving work because she is a legitimate wife and mother, and Anna is not because she acts upon the conscious decision to have no more children. Besides the motive which Tolstoy condemns, her desire to keep her looks, she has an understandable dread of bringing illegitimate children into the world; Tolstoy himself has amply demonstrated the horrors of illegitimacy in this world. But her motives do not seem to count: cutting herself off from the conception of children, she has cut herself off from woman's only real work and relationship to life, and finally, from life itself. Anna is doomed to sterility and meaningless activity; her philanthropic endeavors (which include, significantly, an interest in the education of women) are as futile as Vronsky's, but more unnatural. Able to discuss French novels and architecture, she has made of herself a dazzlingly talented and versatile individual, but Tolstoy condemns her learning and intelligence along with her morphine and riding. And in fact, her cultivation of her intelligence and charm does not constitute a genuine fulfillment of character, but is only a strategy for keeping Vronsky.

Her beauty seems "devilish" to Tolstoy; there is fear in his descriptions of her unruly black hair, her black, glittering eyes, her sculpted shoulders and unfailing elegance. He can be kinder to poor Dolly, but here is the fear of untrammelled female sexuality which he was to acknowledge in The Kreutzer Sonata. But, like Vronsky, Tolstoy becomes more deeply involved with this woman than he could have expected, and she herself turns out to be deeper than he could have planned; and, like Vronsky, his codes prove inadequate in dealing with her. Her superiority to the other women is evident at a glance--at Vronsky's glance when he turns from Kitty to her without second thought, and at ours. Although Tolstoy wishes to approve of Dolly's lot in the scene in which (after their meeting at Anna's country house) she returns home content, it is difficult to

approve of Dolly over Anna. Tolstoy blundered by creating a woman who belied his conceptions of woman, a woman who could not be accommodated by the moral scheme of the novel, and whose superiority is a function of precisely those qualities which make Levin superior--a refusal to sacrifice integrity to convention and deceit, to be ground down by the society Tolstoy himself condemns.

But precisely those qualities which enable Levin to live and find the light doom Anna to darkness and self-destruction. Insidious parallels exist between the two characters which undermine the very contrast Tolstoy means to suggest. She has the same determination to "find a purpose in my life," "not to deceive myself," to "love and live" (pp. 266-67), and the same determination to assume control of her life, to live according to the rule of love and the heart, refusing to accept the lot society assigns her. As a woman, she has a narrower range of activities; whereas we see Levin as a lover, husband, and parent, dealing with problems of death, God, and meaning, we see Anna only as a lover, wife, and mother. Her inner life is similarly restricted; again, as a woman, her thoughts concern primarily men and children--until the very last. Her options are more narrow; her choice is between one man and another, and it is her tragedy that she cannot conceive of another option. But she can hardly be blamed for her failure, since no fulfillment other than the vicarious is ever imagined for a woman in the nineteenth century, even by a woman like George Eliot.¹⁵ Her rebellion can only be expressed by moving from the home of one man to the home of another--and either way, she is doomed.

We see her at the beginning of the novel in a marriage to a man twenty years older than herself, into which she was manipulated when quite young, a marriage which stifles her life and vitality, and, in the recurrent imagery of the novel, quenches the light in her. The marriage is intolerable, yet she cannot leave without violating a moral law for which she must die, and as a result of this choice, her light is finally and forever put out. Though Tolstoy is acute about the sense of dissimulation she feels with her husband, even before she meets Vronsky (p. 95), he does not seem to take into account the sacrifice of integrity involved if she were to obey this "moral law"; dead or alive, she cannot live. Whereas men have the choice between integrity or deception, with integrity being crucial in their moral stature, women have only the choice to obey or disobey. Though salvation for Levin lies in defiance of social convention, a woman must submit--not to achieve her humanity, but merely to survive. Or perhaps one should say, to survive in a way, though Dolly's life is a submission, a grinding, terrible submission, as destructive of the individual as the mutilation Anna imagines in her nightmare ("il faut le battre, le fer, le broyer, le pétrir" [p. 329])--as terrible in life as in death. Astute critic of society's double standard as Tolstoy was, what is this but the same standard? Men in this society, like Anna's brother,

do not die for adultery; even women do not, if they keep it casual, like the Princess Tverskaya. Only Anna must die, because she does not keep her adultery casual, because she is a woman who refuses to submit and live the shallow, unfeeling life Tolstoy himself so thoroughly condemns.

The contrast between Anna's route to death and Levin's to life is emphasized, again by alternating episodes, in the final pages. Anna's final state of despair, hatred, alienation from humanity, and her final plunge into darkness, are contrasted to Levin's new-found faith, light, and discovery of love as the law of life: whereas Anna must die for violating a divine law, Levin is allowed to live and fulfill a divine law. While Levin overhears the words which unlock the meaning of life from a peasant ("he lives for his soul and remembers God" [p. 719]), the peasant functions in Anna's nightmares as an image of nemesis (pp. 324, 399, 695): her alienation from humanity is contrasted to Levin's sense of community, and the peasant is thus an appropriate image of revenge. Yet it is to be noted that, in terms of the society Tolstoy has shown us in the novel, Anna's perceptions are correct, and the only way to deny them is to deny the society itself--which Levin does, by leaving it. The church bells do mask hate, as Lydia Ivanovna's spiritualism disguises self-interest and confused hostility; the society we have seen in the novel is not ruled by love, but by greed and competition. Anna is more accurate, with her bright, searching light, than Tolstoy can admit; again, she raises disturbing issues by no means resolved or refuted by Levin's final illuminations, which end the novel on a note of wish-fulfillment and question-begging, far from adequate to the questions which she, or Tolstoy, has posed. But Tolstoy must kill her in a state of despair which negates the validity of these insights, thus affirming the validity of Levin's final perceptions. Levin retires to the country with an ideal of love and community--not actually to be with people, but to be alone. (What he says of his brother applies as well to him; it is the idea of the people that attracts him more than their company or friendship.) His salvation is finally quite solitary, not even communicated to his wife.

What would Tolstoy have Anna do? What is she, a vital, energetic, and principled woman, who needs to live and love with integrity, to do? Stay with her husband and die, or leave with Vronsky and die--no other alternatives are suggested. Naturally we do not expect easy solutions, but we do feel most tragic figures err by willfully rejecting some reasonably acceptable possibility, not that they are caught between two equally unacceptable alternatives. It is victims who are caught, and we do not experience Anna as a victim, but as a fighter, with a life-energy and determination to live. (Contrast her to that other nineteenth-century adulteress, Emma Bovary: Anna never submits to self-delusion; she retains her clear-sightedness through to the end and becomes clearer, in fact; and although

desperately acting, she never loses herself in the role she is playing.) It is Dolly who is a victim, yet it is Dolly who is allowed to live, whereas Anna is abandoned by her author, left in the dark to stumble off to tragedy, a fallen woman who has violated a moral law; because Tolstoy cannot confront the implications of her existence--that Anna is a human being equal to Levin, and if Levin can attain his humanity only by defying society, the same principles apply also to her.

There is, finally, the same irresolution, the same sense of disturbing incompleteness, on the question of women in the novel as a whole as there is in the argument at the Oblonsky's dinner party (pp. 353-56). Pestov asserts that women's rights are related to their education--if women were educated differently they would be capable of more ("like the Negroes before emancipation")--and that women's desire for new responsibilities, incomprehensible to Prince Shcherbatsky, is understandable because responsibilities bring honor. Karenin, absorbed in his grief, is not in the mood to admit that women are capable creatures. Oblonsky applies the question only to his latest mistress, wondering what will happen to a woman with no family; Dolly, suspecting which woman he is wondering about, is forced by jealousy into an uncharitable position regarding her own sex (though she shows compassion for women elsewhere). Kitty is able to understand something of what Pestov is saying because she has had to contemplate what it would be like to be single, as she tells Levin. But the whole discussion dissolves into laughter at the old Prince's quips that women's hair is long and their wits short, that if women were treated as equals, he should then feel discriminated against because he could not be admitted as a nurse at the foundlings' hospital. Underlying his humor is a concept of woman and woman's function not very different from Levin's, or Tolstoy's. Disturbing issues are raised in this discussion--and they are the central issues of the novel--but no one hears, no one learns, no one follows through or makes connections, and nothing is resolved.

iv

In some sense, of course, it is not Tolstoy who kills Anna, but Anna who kills herself: it may be argued that we cannot hold Tolstoy personally responsible for the world he portrays, nor for history. Though I have to some extent assumed Freud's view of the artist as one who creates and kills characters in fantasy fulfillment, it is also true that, given the character of Anna, given the circumstances Tolstoy places her in, what he shows happening would have happened; the world he portrays is true, and had he altered the picture, he would have falsified it. (Nor would we trade this novel, Anna Karenina, for a tract on the subject of women, for the sake of having Tolstoy "on the right side.") However, we may hold him responsible, if not for the world he portrays, for consistency to his own premises: in

approving of standards for women which he so completely condemns for men, he is false to his own insights, inconsistent within his own terms, and guilty of the same confusion and hypocrisy which he condemns in his society. And he himself provides basis for such criticisms, since he was to see these issues quite differently twelve years later, in The Kreutzer Sonata, a work which, in its lack of detachment, corresponds more clearly than Anna Karenina to Freud's sense of art.

In this work, Tolstoy returns to a number of the problems of Anna Karenina: marriage, the family, adultery, and woman. The author has learned something since Anna, however; the husband and wife of this story, "like two convicts hating each other and chained together,"¹⁶ have lived out the ideal. Children are now no longer seen as a blessing, but as a curse, and by this time, he understands the ennui of being married to another order of being, whom one cannot talk to (p. 138). In a strange way, though this work has the sound of a cry of anguish or an invective, and in spite of the fanatical asceticism which pervades it, it offers considerably more understanding of woman's character and position as a function of education and society. Tolstoy now understands better the effect of social forces on women, not the least of which is men's expectations of them: "Their education is exactly what it has to be in view of our unfeigned, real, general opinion about women. The education of woman will always correspond to men's opinions about them. . . . Woman is an instrument of enjoyment . . . and she knows this" (p. 151). "They emancipate women in universities and law courts, but continue to regard her as an instrument of enjoyment. Teach her, as she is taught, to regard herself as such, and she will always remain an inferior being" (p. 152). Woman's position "can only be changed by a change in men's outlook on women, and women's way of regarding themselves" (p. 152).

The fear of woman, implied in Anna Karenina, is clearly expressed here. After the doctor teaches Pozdnyshev's wife methods of contraception and she stops having children, "She developed a provocative kind of beauty which made people restless. She was in the full vigor of a well-fed and excited woman of thirty who is not bearing children. Her appearance disturbed people. . . . She was like a fresh, well-fed, harnessed horse, whose bridle has been removed. . . . And I felt this--and was frightened" (p. 166). Since woman has been defined as a sexual being--"she had been brought up in the belief that there was only one thing in the world worthy of attention--love" (p. 167)--when freed from the necessity of repeated pregnancies, she becomes dangerous. A strong incentive for keeping her physically disabled is thus revealed.

Once again, the author offers a situation in which the woman is killed, though here, the act is more direct, since it is the male protagonist, her husband, who kills her, rather than the novelist who structures a situation in which she must kill herself. But Tolstoy's most revealing insight occurs at her

deathbed. When, turning to Pozdnyshv, she asks, "Why did it all happen? Why?" he responds with a startling realization: "for the first time I forgot myself, my rights, my pride, and saw a human being within her. And so insignificant did all that had offended me, all my jealousy appear . . . that I wished to fall with my face to her hand and say, 'Forgive me!'" (p. 208). Here is Tolstoy at his best, struggling to recognize "the human being within her," though perhaps only capable of the attempt after she is dead. It was a tragically simple realization, yet one beyond most inhabitants of the nineteenth century, that women are people too.

NOTES

¹Countess Lydia Ivanovna, Princess Elizabeth Fedorovna Tverskaya, and the Princess Myagkaya, respectively. The latter, the "enfant terrible," is most interesting as a woman who, having finally ceased listening to her husband, understands certain things: "If our husbands didn't talk we should see things as they really are; and it's my opinion that Karenin is simply stupid. . . . Does this not make everything quite clear? Formerly, when I was told to consider him wise, I kept trying to, and thought I was stupid myself because I was unable to perceive his wisdom; but as soon as I said to myself, he's stupid . . . it all became quite clear!" Anna Karenina: A Norton Critical Edition, ed. George Gibian, trans. Aylmer Maude (New York: Norton, 1970), p. 123. All further references to Anna Karenina are to this edition and are included in the text.

²Virginia Woolf describes the effects of the constraints imposed by the narrowness of women's lives upon their writing. As she notes, the novels of the Brontes, Austen, and Eliot "were written by women without more experience of life than could enter the house of a respectable clergyman." Women are trained in the observation of character and society, but do not question the world's basic assumptions. A Room of One's Own (1928; rpt. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1957), p. 73. Simone de Beauvoir makes similar observations: "They [women writers] lack metaphysical resonances," "they do not ask the world questions, they do not expose its contradictions," The Second Sex (1949; rpt. New York: Bantam Books, 1970), ch. 25, "The Independent Woman," p. 669. All further references to The Second Sex are to this edition and are included in the text.

³Middlemarch (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), p. 612. A passage in Dombey and Son is also relevant: "It might be worthwhile, sometimes, to inquire what Nature is, and how men work to change her and whether, in the enforced distortions so produced, it is not natural to be unnatural." Dickens is

speculating about the effects of poverty and deprivation on the human spirit, and this inquiry might be extended to the "nature" of woman, though he does not so extend it. (Middlesex: Penguin, 1975), p. 737. For a discussion of the origins of the novel in relation to bourgeois society, see Ian Watt, The Rise of the Novel (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1957.

⁴See especially ch. 21, "Woman's Situation and Character," pp. 562 ff.

⁵Quoted in de Beauvoir, p. 224. De Beauvoir cites Stendhal as the only male novelist who has ever fully projected himself into the mind and situation of woman.

⁶Levin applies this term to Oblonsky's work, when he visits him in his office in Moscow: "How can you take it seriously?" Oblonsky replies, "We're really overwhelmed with work," and Levin answers, "Oh paper. Ah well! You've a gift for that sort of thing" (p. 18).

⁷See ch. 1, "The Data of Biology."

⁸In fact, the older women in this novel correspond to the types described by de Beauvoir in ch. 20, "From Maturity to Old Age," pp. 451 ff.

⁹Fantasia of the Unconscious (London: Martin Secker, 1930), pp. 175-76. Lawrence's views on Anna Karenina are discussed by Henry Gifford and Raymond Williams, "D. H. Lawrence and Tolstoy: A Critical Debate," Critical Quarterly, 1, No. 3 (1959) and 2, Nos. 1 and 2 (1960).

¹⁰"In general, my heroes and heroines sometimes do things which I would not have wanted them to do: they do what they would have to do in real life, according to the way things are, not just the way I would want them to be." Tolstoy to G. A. Rusanov, in S. P. Bychkov, "The Social Bases of Anna Karenina," L. N. Tolstoy v shkole, ed. V. V. Golubkov (Moscow, 1965), pp. 159-77; rpt. Norton Anna Karenina, p. 834.

¹¹Ibid, pp. 822-35.

¹²Letter to Polonsky, May 13, 1875; quoted in Henry Troyat, Tolstoy (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1967), p. 390.

¹³There are those in the novel who are able to rise to forgiveness and those who are caught in concerns of retribution. A final indication of the state in which Anna dies is the expression on her face after her death, described as "cruelly vindictive" (p. 707); she dies exacting revenge on Vronsky. That vengeance is hers is another way in which what actually

happens in the novel diverges from Tolstoy's professed intentions,

¹⁴Letter, Oct. 29, 1910. Quoted in Troyat, p. 705.

¹⁵In the finale of Middlemarch, George Eliot admits that many who knew Dorothea "thought it a pity that so substantive and rare a creature should have been absorbed into the life of another, and be only known in a certain circle as a wife and mother. But no one stated exactly what else that was in her power she ought rather have done" (p. 611).

¹⁶The Kreutzer Sonata and Other Tales (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 163.