
This is a slim but substantive volume applying the narratological theories of Peter Brooks (*Reading for the Plot*) to three works in Tolstoy’s later writings: *The Death of Ivan Il’ich, The Kreutzer Sonata*, and *Master and Man*. The basis for Kåre Mjør’s selection of these three particular texts is their shared thematic treatment of desire and death. His intent is to delve into each narrative to extricate the process of the creation of meaning within the diegetic unfolding of the tale. The title’s formulation of desire refers to narrative motivations and therefore only obliquely touches on sexuality (in *Kreutzer Sonata*), while death is variously regarded as the dying process, death of the other, and the *imitatio Christi*. Instead of elaborating on the more traditional configuration of *eros* and *thanatos*, Mjør focuses on the concept of “existential desire,” defined as the craving for a conclusive meaning for life, triggered by the apprehension of mortality. Existential desire compels the creation of a meta-narrative, which, in the works of Tolstoy under consideration, is shown to re-inscribe the reading process itself.

Working from alternating perspectives of Aristotelian poetics, Heideggerian existentialism, and psychoanalytically inflected narratology, Mjør builds on Barthesian concepts of the desire for the ending, famously fused in Brooks’ narratology with Sigmund Freud’s pairing of *eros* and *thanatos*. The case of *Ivan Il’ich*—where the eponymous protagonist’s death-bed effort to infuse his life with meaning results in the retrospective negation of that life—serves as the paradigmatic model for this study. Mjør’s theoretical postulates inhere well in this sustained reading of *The Death of Ivan Il’ich*, winning new life for Heidegger’s gloss on Ivan Il’ich’s dying process as the quest for authenticity.

The chapter on *Kreutzer Sonata* is less compelling, consisting of a sustained synopsis of the work based on Roland Barthes’ notion of narrative contract (*S/Z*) and Bakhtinian dialogue. The chapter culminates in the application of the Girardian notion of mimetic desire to the Trukhachevskii-Pozdnyshiev relationship, and is capped by a discussion of Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*.

The final chapter on *Master and Man* revisits the notion of internal transformation in the face of impending death as expressed in Brekhunov’s conversionary re-evaluation of his life. However, lacking in both this chapter and in the pages on *Kreutzer Sonata* is the careful attention expended on the reading process and the textual generation of the desire for meaning that opened the volume so boldly in the case of *Ivan Il’ich*. Pozdnyshiev is said to make his effort to recuperate meaning through the hyperdiegetic strategy of re-narrating his murder; Brekhunov’s series of reflections on his past are considered to result in the evacuation of desire from the text’s own dynamics. One result of the latter reading may be a reductive compression of Nikita’s characterization into a foil for Brekhunov’s, while the comparison to Ivan Il’ich begins to seem watery and thin. Similarly, the concept of existential desire sits most uncomfortably on Pozdnyshiev’s shoulders, where the advent of death necessary for the initiation of desire is necessarily transferred to his wife. In the concluding sentence of the book, the author appears to recognize that “the release achieved through death for Ivan Il’ich, Brekhunov and Nikita has not yet occurred for Pozdnyshiev,” thus allowing his most complex character to escape alive, unconfounded, and therefore, ultimately, unaccounted for. This reader did not desire the end of this all too brief book, and the ephemeral concluding remarks, with their transient but intriguing Girardian take on *Resurrection* and *Father Sergius* are worthy of a more extended treatment.

*Death, Desire, and Imitation* caters to the specialist with absorbing and thought-provoking interpretive readings of three major short works of
Tolstoy. These short stories are often taught, and
the instructor may find many speculative ideas in
this book that can do service in classroom discus-
sion. Any student of Tolstoy’s later works will find
much to contemplate in its pages.

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NEW YORK, GRADUATE CENTER

Liza Knapp and Amy Mandelker, eds.
Approaches to Teaching Tolstoy’s Anna
Karenina. New York: The Modern
Pp. xi + 226.

Whether the competition is for “greatest novel ever
written,” “most popular Russian novel in the
undergraduate curriculum,” “most studied Russian
novel in the English language,” “most often quoted
first sentence of a novel,” or even “novel, least
faithful film adaptations of,” Anna Karenina will
surely finish in the money. Anna Karenina is a
reliable frontrunner in the American undergraduate
literature curriculum. Approaches to Teaching
Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina [Teaching AK] is a
welcome addition to the long-running series
Approaches to Teaching World Literature, spon-
sored by the Modern Languages Association’s
Publication Committee.

The overarching goal of the MLA series is to
“encourage serious and continuing discussion of
the aims and methods of teaching literature” at the
undergraduate level (vii). Each volume in the series
seems to adhere to a fairly regimented protocol,
beginning with a questionnaire widely distributed
among teachers. For Teaching AK thirty-nine
teachers responded, of whom twenty-three have
contributed short essays to the volume. In keeping
with the series format, Teaching AK is organized
around three basic themes: background materials,
critical approaches, and classroom methods.

The background materials, ably and concisely
handled by editors Liza Knapp and Amy Mandel-
ker, include essential information on names and
setting in Anna Karenina, a few words on various
Russian editions of the novel, a fair and balanced
characterization of the merits of various English
translations, and recommended readings available
in English. The list of readings, which features
recent scholarship (much of it published within the
past fifteen years), attests to the growing interest in
Tolstoy studies in English.

The editors give well deserved recognition to C.
J. G. Turner’s A Karenina Companion (1993)
an invaluable guide to the novel” (48). They also
note that the Tolstoy Studies Journal (a source for
earlier, scholarly versions of some of the essays
represented in Teaching AK) represents the best
Tolstoy scholarship and criticism” (48). The ed-
tors pay special tribute to Richard Gustafson’s Leo
Tolstoy: Resident and Stranger, calling it “the
definitive study of Tolstoy’s prose” and “the criti-
cal work most frequently cited by questionnaire
respondents” (47).

Praise for Gustafson’s radiant work on Tolstoy
almost mollifies this reader’s discomfort with the
MLA’s cookie-cutter approach to the methods and
organization of the series, but not quite. Many of
the essays on Anna Karenina—and here an appreci-
ative “thanks” to editors Knapp and Mandelker,
themselves Tolstoy scholars of the first rank—trans-
cend the nominal categories into which they are
organized. The twenty-three contributors (mostly
American) to Teaching AK bring a trove of teach-
ing experience to the novel. The diverse topics and
approaches embrace a smorgasbord, something for
every taste: close reading of key passages; materi-
als to assist teaching the novel in English transla-
tion; the demonstration of specific critical ap-
proaches (Freudian, feminist); attention to the
novel’s form and structure; the novel in cultural
context (social and legal status of women; agrarian
and political reforms); the literary context of
adultery; the use of filmed versions of the novel,
the influence of Plato and Platonic dialogue, etc.

In some of the best essays the scholar’s voice
has ceded authority to the teacher’s down-to-earth
“how do we engage students with the novel” voice.
That collective pedagogic voice, which sounds
throughout Teaching AK, is one of the volume’s
greatest strengths. Gary Jahn, for example, writes
“I have found that students experience the sense of