Review Articles

FEMINIST CRITICISM AND ANNA KARENINA. A REVIEW ARTICLE

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Judith Armstrong, The Unsaid Anna Karenina. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988, 202 pp.

Mary Evans, Reflecting on Anna Karenina. London: Routledge, 1989, 99 pp.

1. Problems in Ideological Criticism

"If I were to try to say in words everything that I intended to express in my novel [Anna Karenena], I would have to write the same novel I wrote from the beginning."[1] These much-quoted words of Tolstoy's elevate the abstruse discourse of verbal art above critical exegesis, as he intended, and diminish the value of any attempt at thematic or moral criticism. The very notion of practicing a "moral," or "ethical" criticism is daunting in any case, exposed as it is to the dangers of the "politics of interpretation" or to charges of a relativistic subjectivism defined by deconstruction as "the problem that develops when a consciousness gets involved in interpreting another consciousness, the basic pattern from which there can be no escape in the social sciences."[2] Or can there be, as J. Hillis Miller has argued, a moment of pure ethical critical response? Is there "a necessary ethical moment in the act of reading as such, a moment neither cognitive, nor political, nor social, nor interpersonal, but properly and independently ethical"?[3] How is ideological criticism to escape the twin pitfalls of the doctrinaire rejection, even censorship, of any ideologically flawed work or, its obverse: the critical blindness that results from our own unconscious affirmation of the ideology implicit in a text?

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[1]Letter to Strakhov, 23-26 April, 1876.

[2]Paul de Man, Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism (1971). 2nd ed. Theory and History of Literature, vol. 7, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983: 9.

[3]J. Hillis Miller, The Ethics of Reading: Kant, de Man, Eliot, Trollope, James, and Benjamin. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986: 1.

Equally as problematic for those critics who attempt to engage Tolstoyan morality as a necessary part of Tolstoyan artistry, is the fact that the type of critical procedure which extracts a "message" or moral from the text is exactly the opposite of what Tolstoy demanded from literary criticism. In his treatise, What is Art?, Tolstoy would state quite explicitly that the moral, theme, and topic of a work of art do not determine its value, even from the moral point of view. Rather, it is the effect of the work, its infectious capacity to knit together an audience in Christian love, that elevates even the most secular work above an overtly Christian piece of iconography. These ideas were nascent, even at the time of writing Anna Karenina some twenty years earlier. In the letter to Strakhov quoted above, Tolstoy criticizes the socio-criticism, or political criticism practised in his time, and, by extension, all ideological or moral criticism:

> People are needed for the criticism of art who can show the pointlessness of looking for ideas in a work of art and can steadfastly guide readers through that endless labyrinth of connections (labirint sceplenij) which is the essence of art, and towards those laws that serve as the basis of these connections.[4]

In this passage, Tolstoy rejects a criticism which would consider its task to be the elucidation and evaluation of a work of art's thematic content or "message" and calls instead essentially for the practise of close readings: explications in which the critic would investigate the semiotics of a work of art, its signifying elements and structures and the laws or principles by which they are selected and combined. Furthermore, Tolstoy's invitation or challenge to a close reading is not meant to result either in a new or definitive interpretation, or in the retrieval of authorial intention, but rather is intended to reveal the "essence of art" and its "laws"; that is, he calls for an aesthetic, not an evaluative, telos for literary criticism.

Yet, particularly in the case of the novel, the practise of an ethical criticism does not ideologize or politicize--affirmatively or subversively--an essentially neutral art work, since the very subject of the novel itself, especially the novel of adultery, is already ideological. The goal in practising an ethical criticism might therefore be to recognize that the ideological aspect of the work is necessarily part of its overall artistic design.[5]

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[4]Letter to Strakhov, 23-26 April, 1876.

[5]This viewpoint was essential to the earliest formulations of Russian Formalist poetics, and a programme which became increasingly important as the Formalist critics developed their theories. Formalist critical practise, therefore, does not quite deserve the reputation it has acquired in recent years

Feminist ideological criticism, therefore, seems particularly appropriate to the case of Anna Karenina, a novel which strenuously interrogates the institutions of marriage and romantic love. The two recent studies of Anna Karenina reviewed here take up these issues from strikingly different perspectives within feminist critical theory. Armstrong's book belongs to the psychoanalytically based branch of French deconstructionist feminist theory, while Evans writes within the tradition of Anglo-American feminism, steering a course between what has been called the "biocentric" wing of international feminism and other feminist theorizing that explores the way gender has been socially and politically constructed.

Armstrong's study utilizes Freudian-Lacanian models of the personality and desire in textual analysis to support her thesis that the novel subverts its major premises. Defining the very goal of psychoanalytic criticism as the intention to "study how the text reveals or even draws attention to those elements which cast the surface reading into doubt" (23), Armstrong begins her study by marrying a variety of psychological theories on early parent loss to an analysis of Tolstoy's own infantile attachment to his mother. In her readings of Childhood, The Cossacks, and Anna Karenina, Armstrong sees Tolstoy's creative impulses as dedicated toward the process of objectifying his maternal attachment, resulting in textual returns and obsessions which "recreate in every reader the memory of a universal experience--separation from the mother...." (22) Simultaneously, noting Irigaray's belief that every father fantasizes about seducing his daughter, Armstrong sees Anna as Tolstoy's daughter: the embodiment of Tolstoy's own sexual passion, his repressed death drive, and his ambivalence toward women. At the same time, Tolstoy's unconscious love for Anna allows her to gain the power and meaning of a mythological hero. Thus, although the novel operates on one level to vindicate the patriarchal order, Armstrong suggests that on other levels it actively subverts the same systems it upholds: "The subterranean forces at work in Tolstoy's novel affect every level of its operation, subverting the norms of rhetoric and discourse as well as those of morality, sexuality, and identity." (184) Thus, Armstrong concludes, "The hierarchy appears to win only if we read Anna's story as one of retribution against an isolated individual who tried to pit herself against the system; but in reality the triumph of the 'fallen woman' is proclaimed in the power she exerts over author, reader, and text." (124)

Evans' work, being part of a series entitled "Heroines?" necessarily questions the very notion of heroism and explores Anna's characterization in preference to other aspects of the novel, such as structure, plot, or imagery. Evans debates various ways of interpreting Anna's characterization from feminist perspectives: as a victim, as a figure of the deadly and destructive power of sexual passion, and as a "fantasy...of both Tolstoy and Vronsky." (10) In drawing her conclusion that "Anna Karenina is deeply ingrained with male guilt...male fantasy,

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of operating within a vacuum or absence of contextualization.

and fear of the sexual power of women," (23) Evans proceeds to view Anna, not as a victim, but as a "morally ambivalent character, a character who is far from passive, and far from helpless and betrayed." (26) In fact, "to make Anna a victim ignores her capacity to manipulate and control others...." (32) To argue that Anna is a victim of the patriarchy and bourgeois institutions, is to remove or excuse individual moral responsibility, Evans suggests, in a departure from the strategy of much feminist criticism that reads doomed heroines as victims. Evans goes even further in denying that Anna acts to subvert or resist the patriarchy: "Far from resisting conventions, Anna internalizes their constraints. Anna is a poor friend to other women, and she is left in no position to challenge others' judgements of herself as a fallen woman." (84) The fact that other women in the novel survive under patriarchal oppression, Evans argues, fulfills the reader's need for a viable alternative to Anna's ineffectual and self-destructive resistance, concluding that: "If there is a message in Anna Karenina, it is perhaps that domestic life and maternity save women from Anna's hideous fate of morbid jealousy and destructive introspection." (22)

Thus, while Armstrong vindicates Anna as a mythological heroine invested with Tolstoy's repressed mission to subvert the status quo, Evans denies her any heroic stature whatever. In raising the question of whether Anna is the heroine of the novel, or what kind of a heroine she may be, both works perpetuate certain key issues in the continuing debate over the novel's "message" or "moral," by finding the novel to be, at least a condemnation of Anna, by problematizing the issue of whether Anna should be read as a victim, or as an active (and hence empowered and autonomous) manipulator of her own fate.

2. Problems in Criticizing Anna Karenina

The line taken by both Armstrong and Evans reflects a recent paradigm shift in criticism of novelistic adulterous heroines, or of any heroine for that matter. In the wake of feminist revisions of the canon and re-readings of major works about women, the important question has shifted from the earlier debate over authority and authorial intention, to a rejection of any ambivalent characterization as primarily misogynist. Feminist criticism of the 1970s posed the problem of whether an author's act in condemning a transgressing heroine to death implies his or her approbation of social conventions and mores, or whether these same authors intended their heroines to be regarded as the victims of moral and social conventions which require re-evaluation. More recent feminist criticisms demand of novelistic heroines that they represent an unambiguous feminist ideal, even if only partially realized. Otherwise, novelistic heroines remain the creations of a patriarchally structured desire, ambivalence, and anxiety. Twentieth century readings of Anna Karenina follow this attitudinal shift and thus constitute a two-staged series of ideologically determined or culturally biased mis-readings. Historically, Anna's transgression has been both universalized and trivialized by a masculinist critical reading. If Anna's fall is read as universal, its specificity to the problems of gender is denied, suggesting that women's problems alone are insufficient to the tragic mode unless expanded to include both

genders, while men's problems (such as war or statesmanship) do not require universalizing. Or, anti-feminist readings assume Anna's problems are too trivial for us to take her seriously. Alternately, the power of Anna's rebellion is diminished by feminist critics such as Evans, who see her as an inadequate role model for the task of women's liberation. Both readings, "masculinist" and "feminist," opposed as they are ideologically, impoverish the potential heroism of Anna's transgression and mute the mythological tones of her quest and fall. Both readings unite in finding Anna "guilty," and in labelling her a "bad," even an "evil" woman. Her failure according to these interpretations is both proximate and ultimate, since she transgresses against the values of a patriarchal society yet fails to liberate herself and thus remains a compliant prisoner of the patriarchy. In both views, the compelling and attractive features of Anna's characterization are attributed either to Tolstoy's masterful intent to avoid a two-dimensional characterization, or, to Tolstoy's failure to master his own psycho-sexual drives and uncontrolled repressions. In the latter case, we are treated to a Russian reprise of the Flaubertian "Mme. Bovary c'est moi"[6] or to the type of Freudian psychoanalysis undertaken by Armstrong, to explain how Tolstoy's early traumatic loss of his mother resulted in the compulsive projection of sexual anima onto a desired, female object whose resulting attractiveness and potential for cathexis is so profoundly threatening, that even her paper representation must be destroyed.[7]

In order to evaluate the contributions feminist critical readings have to offer in the interpretation of Anna Karenina, it will be helpful to consider the two studies reviewed here in the context of the preceding critical debate over the novel. Historically, the criticism on Anna Karenina has characterized the novel as a conte morale or novelistic sermon on the text used as epigraph, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay." Despite critical recognition of the novel's complexity and the ambivalence of Anna's characterization, critical consensus assumes the novel condemns Anna with heavy-handed didacticism, as Nekrasov observed:

> Tolstoy, you've proved with patience and
> with talent,
> That a woman should not gallivant
> With aide-de-camp or adjutant

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[6]John Bayley even places Flaubert's words in Tolstoy's mouth: "In such a relation it does not matter how apparently dissimilar is the creator from his creation: it is not a kinship of externals and ideas but of a deeper psychological identification....like Flaubert with his heroine, Tolstoy--had he been given to such comments--could have said: 'Madame Karenine, c'est moi'." Tolstoy and the Novel, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966, 1988: 201.

[7]"What [Tolstoy] loves in Anna is his own sexuality," comments Armstrong in her most succinct summation of Tolstoy's unconscious drives as embodied in the novel. The Unsaid Anna Karenina, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988: 94.

When she's a wife and mother.[8]

Critics have traditionally determined that the novel expresses Tolstoy's conservative position on the "Woman Question."[9] In commenting on Tolstoy's extra-literary discussions of sexual morality, marriage, and adultery, both feminists and non-feminists automatically place Tolstoy among the arch-conservatives in the public debate on the "Woman Question," despite the radical feminist implications of his post-conversion writings on this topic. If his post-conversion views are discussed, they are only used to make Tolstoy into the ridiculous and grotesque spectacle of a hypocrite preaching chastity within marriage while continuing to father children with his wife. Evans and Armstrong are no exception to this consensus.

Based on the standard survey of Tolstoy's published views on the "Woman Question" and the overwhelmingly damning evidence of his diaries and married life, it is usually assumed that Anna Karenina supports traditional values and social roles based on gender, even when it is recognized that the novel's aim is to problematize the institutions of marriage and family life By following this interpretation, Armstrong and Evans perpetuate certain pre-feminist attitudes. In some earlier critical accounts, the novel's heroines are even denied consciousness of their own problematic status and their desire for liberation is discounted as a psychological motivation: "the problem of family happiness and the meaning of life and death," writes a leading Tolstoy scholar in the 1960s, "is a man's subject. The Kittys, Annas and Natashas are not troubled by it."[10] What, then, is troubling Anna Karenina? According to René Wellek, she has "no interests" (as if broderie anglaise or visits to the poor would suffice!); she suffers from "boredom with her joint-cracking bureaucrat."[11] Even if the profundity of Anna's conflict is recognized, her emotional reaction is condemned:

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[8]Tolstoj, ty dokazal s terpen'em i talantom,
Čto ženščine ne sleduet 'guljat''
Ni s kamer-junkerom, ni s fligel'ad"jutantom,
Kogda ona žena i mat'.

The translation is mine. Cited in A. V. Knowles, Tolstoy. The Critical Heritage. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978: 292.

[9]An important exception is Barbara Heldt's chapter, "Tolstoy's Path to Feminism," in her Terrible Perfection, Women and Russian Literature. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969: 181.

[10]R. F. Christian, Tolstoy. A Critical Introduction. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969: 181.

[11]René Wellek, "The Nineteenth-Century Russian Novel in English and American Criticism," in The Russian Novel from Pushkin to Pasternak. John Garrard, ed. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983, p. 250.

> A whole society, perhaps the species itself, is at stake, and here a wretched woman temporizes about it, numbs herself with opium, whimpers over her own precious individuality, and finally jeopardizes everything by suicide.[12]

Alternately, Anna is castigated because she fails to assume responsibility for healing her own psychic conflicts and repressions, as Gustafson comments:

> Anna's story is not a tale of social oppression or a drama of failed liberation. Tolstoy, it should be recalled, insisted that people have no rights, only responsibilities....Anna abandons her flawed human relatedness to which she is responsible....But Anna is not destroyed by others, and self-indulgence is not her fundamental flaw. Anna is not punished by Tolstoy for her sexual fulfillment. In a fuller sense, Anna's story is a moral tragedy of self-enclosure.[13]

Evans offers a similar, if simplified, criticism: "[Anna] emerges as guilty in the wider sense of a person who was unable to control and discipline her passions and her inclinations." (35)

Yet, Anna's inadequacy to the task of self-development and social reform may be read as continuing that Russian literary tradition which couples the impulse to social rebellion with individual weakness and impotence. When this problematic psychological profile is embodied in the type of the superfluous man, he earns our censurious sympathy, and pitying contempt, but he is rarely labelled evil, even when he murders his best friend, or commits rape and other felonies. Tolstoy's manoeuvre of replacing the superfluous man with a superfluous woman whose incapacity is as much a result of her gender as is her vital passion, provokes a hostile, judgemental, response from both feminists and non-feminists. Is this a reflection of Tolstoy's own attitude? A result of the work of the novel to condemn Anna? Or, does the superfluous man draw less fire because his Byronic lassitude, his cavalier destructiveness, and his refusal to commit to human relations are characteristics implicitly approved by a masculinist code which considers these attributes the natural expression of male individualism? By contrast, a feminist critic might argue, female rebellion involves disengaging from what are perceived

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[12]David H. Steward, "Anna Karenina: The Dialectic of Prophecy," PMLA 79 (1964): 266-274.

[13]Richard Gustafson, Leo Tolstoy. Resident and Stranger. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986: 131-132.

to be a woman's natural occupations of housekeeping and motherhood; therefore, she is considered to be monstrous and perverse in deviating from the natural parameters of her femininity. This sexual stereotyping is common to both "traditionalist" male-dominated criticism and to the more recent feminist criticism. The following views expressed by 19th century readers of the novel still seem to underly contemporary judgements:

> [Anna]--<u>because she is frivolous and endowed with a superficial culture</u>--is bound to live the life of the emotions and to seek the joys of the heart which she cannot find in living with the man she married.[14]

Or:

> All the meaning of the family, all its potential and all its morality depend, do they not, on the wife and mother, and if she destroys the family will not the woman perish <u>along with the purpose of her life and any meaning she might have as a person?</u>...If only [women] could understand that in the self-denial and self-sacrifice of a wife and mother there is more value and more moral satisfaction than in the pursuit of their own appetites and fantasies![15]

The identical ideology may be found in 20th century criticism:

> A woman, the traditional repository of cultural values which she must convey to the young, Anna forfeits her responsibility to her own son and then, in hideous irony, presumes to write editfying books for children. I suggest that...when woman loses her proper role as culture-bearer, her society is dead.[16]

Even Evans' intentionally feminist reading of <u>Anna Karenina</u> relies on the perpetuation of these attitudes in contemporary society:

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[14]Emphasis added. V. Markov, Review in <u>Nedelja</u>, 1878, No. 1. Translated in Knowles, 305-310, p. 308.

[15]Emphasis added. A. V. Stankevich, "Anna Karenina and Lyovin," <u>The European Courier</u>, 1878, Nos. 4-5, trans. in Knowles, 293-305, p. 296 and 304.

[16]Stewart, 274.

> After all, the mother, a married woman, who deliberately chooses an adulterous relationship rather than her maternal responsibilities would still today be labelled as a deviant and 'unnatural' woman. (40)

The case against Anna, the "strategy of the novel" that "is directed against [her]" so that "Anna must be destroyed"[17] is based on readers' perceptions of the inevitability of her suicide, which is construed as a death sentence, a form of retribution, divine or social, prefigured in the novel's epigraph, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay." So common is the death of the transgressing heroine in 19th century fiction, that it has come to be seen as an obligatory sop thrown to conventional morality which allows the author latitude for a sympathetic portrayal of his or her heroine, or reveals the author's discomfort in affirming deviance.[18] Both Armstrong and Evans adopt this view, in Evans' words: "Anna, many feminists would remark, ends the novel dead: the inequalities between women and men that constitute a major feature of western society are vividly portrayed in the novel--bourgeois heterosexuality kills women and ruins men." (3-4) Armstrong draws the same conclusion: "The overall message is to all intents unequivocal; in Anna Karenina Levin makes the right choices and so lives and flourishes beyond the back cover of the book; Anna chooses wrongly, and therefore must die even before the last chapter. Nothing could be clearer." (24)

However, most critics have found that this aspect of the novel is extremely problematic and far from clear. To begin with, Tolstoy's use of the Biblical epigraph, especially as it is incomplete, omitting, "saith the Lord," creates a disconcerting uncertainty in the reader as to who is speaking: Does Tolstoy quote God, or speak for God or as his surrogate, or is Tolstoy God? Is authority equivalent or superior to divine nemesis? As Eikhenbaum complained: "The point is not, of course, that Tolstoy makes the solution of guilt and criminality subject to the will of God, but that this God [is] now undoubtedly subject to the will of Tolstoy as the author of the novel...."[19] Anna's death is alternately read, not as the result of God's vengeance on her, but as the culmination of the cruel and unforgiving treatment she received at the hands of her fellow man, as Shklovsky proclaimed: "Genuine human morality contradicts the Biblical quotation, and it is not God, but people,...who pushed Anna under the

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[17]Gifford, 301.

[18]For a discussion of this theme in Russian literature, see Ellen Chances, Conformity's Children: An Approach to the Superfluous Man in Russian Literature. Columbus: Slavica, 1978.

[19]Boris Èjxenbaum, Tolstoy in the Seventies, trans. Albert Kaspin, Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1982: 138.

wheels of the train."[20]

These two readings reflect the distinction between the Old and New Testament judgements on sexual transgression and punishment. Since Tolstoy did not cite chapter and verse for his epigraph, it remains unclear whether he referred to the Old or New Testament version of the statement. Interpretations of the epigraph, therefore, either assume an Old Testament morality and the punitive action of a wrathful God which is embodied in worldly events, or follow the Christian precept that it is not for humanity to judge, but for God; not on earth, but in heaven. This was the view expressed by Dostoevsky: "There are not, and cannot be any healers or final judges of human problems other than He who says, 'Vengeance is mine; I will repay.' He alone knows the whole enigma of the world and the final destiny of man."[21] What we know about the origination of the epigraph in Tolstoy's novel argues for this latter interpretation. Eikhenbaum has demonstrated that Tolstoy took the Biblical quotation from a passage in Schopenhauer demanding suspension of human judgment:

> No person has the authority to set himself up as a purely moral judge and avenger, to punish the misdeeds of another with pain which he inflicts on him.... This would be, rather, presumption of the highest degree; hence the Biblical "Vengeance is mine; I will repay."[22]

The Biblical quotation may also be found in other novels of the period dealing with adultery, specifically, in two works Tolstoy was known to have read and admired: Trollope's Phineas Redux and Mrs. Henry Wood's East Lynne,[23] In Phineas Redux, the eponymous hero attempts to soften the wrath of the abandoned husband by quoting this passage from Scripture. Similarly, in East Lynne, the abandoned husband restrains himself from action against his rival by quoting the same Biblical passage. Within

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[20]Viktor Sklovskij, Lev Tolstoy, Moscow: Progress, 1978: 436.

[21]Fedor Dostoevskij, Dnevnik pisatelja, 1877.

[22]Cited in Èjxenbaum, Tolstoy in the Seventies. Èjxenbaum demonstrates quite convincingly that Tolstoy originally simply translated Schopenhauer's "Mein ist die Rache" into an inaccurate Russian version, "Otmscenie moe," and only later corrected his Russian text against the Church Slavic.

[23]It is more than likely that Tolstoy had read these novels at the time he was composing Anna Karenina. He mentions Harriet Wood in his correspondence with admiration, and in his list of literary influences as "bol'soe vlijanie" during the period of writing Anna Karenina. He is known to have read the entire Palliser series as it appeared in print. Phineas Redux was published one year before Anna Karenina. East Lynne offers a great deal of intertextual resonance with Anna Karenina, and the significance of Trollope for Tolstoy has been well documented.

this literary tradition of adulteresses spared punishment at their husbands' hands, the Scriptural passage becomes even more clearly associated with the other Biblical text which is frequently repeated throughout Anna Karenina: "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone."[24] Tanner has suggested that the tension between Old and New Testament rulings on adultery constitutes the driving force of the novel of adultery:

> In the bourgeois novel we can find a strictness that works to maintain the law, and a sympathy and understanding with the adulteress violator that works to undermine it.... [T]he Old Testament and New Testament methods of confronting adultery may both be found operating within the same book...Indeed, it is arguable that it is just such a tension between law and sympathy that holds the great bourgeois novel together....[25]

Other critics find the notion that Anna's suicide is a moral judgement to be "quite barbaric, a sort of divine judgement such as an author in the Middle Ages might have imagined...."[26] or a failure in artistic design, as D. H. Lawrence commented, "Imagine any great artist making the vulgar social condemnation of Anna and Vronsky figure as divine punishment!"[27] Or, Anna's suicide is construed as a reprieve, her death "is meant...to be Anna's deliverance; it is out of pity for her that [Tolstoy] has granted her the favor of death."[28] Or, it is out of pity for himself, as Harold Bloom suggests: "Tolstoy could not sustain the suffering it would have cost him to imagine a life [Anna] could have borne

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[24]For a comprehensive study of all the references to the Biblical passage in the novel, see Rebecca S. Hogan, The Wisdom of Many, the Wit of One: The Narrative Function of the Proverb in Tolstoy's "Anna Karenina" and Trollope's "Orley Farm." Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Boulder: University of Colorado, 1984.

[25]Tony Tanner, Adultery in the Novel. Contract and Transgression. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979: 14.

[26]E. Depuy, Les Grands Maitres de la littérature russe au dix-neuvième siècle (1885); cited in Knowles, 326.

[27]D. H. Lawrence, from his Introduction to Cavalleria Rusticana, in Henry Gifford, ed. Leo Tolstoy, A Critical Anthology. Hammondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1971: 196-197, p. 197.

[28]Depuy, 329.

to go on living."[29]

Rarely, critics like Jackson[30] have noticed the coloration of fatality in the details that overdetermine Anna's suicide, and find Anna to be a tragic heroine, "because for reasons that are admirable [she] cannot live [a] divided life or survive through repression."[31] "The tragic situation is a situation from which there is no escape...[Anna's] fate has a contingency and yet a pattern that bears the marks, not of the author's vindictiveness, but of the poetic inevitability we associate with tragedy."[32] Other critics, perhaps following D. H. Lawrence, question the possibility for tragedy in overstepping what Lawrence called the "smaller system of morality":

> Anna, Eustacia [Vye], Tess [Durbeyfield] or Sue [Bridehead]--what was there in their position that was necessarily tragic? Necessarily painful it was, but they were not at war with God, only with Society. Yet they were all cowed by the mere judgement of man upon them, and all the while by their own souls they were right. And the judgement of men killed them, not the judgement of their own souls or the judgement of Eternal God.[33]

If the novel has the tenor of tragic form, such that "Destiny is the plot,"[34] and "character is revealed as a determined shape, as an embodiment of an already existing fate,"[35] it is curious that most critics nonetheless deny Anna the status of a tragic heroine. Is this because of a reluctance to read an apparently ultra-realist novel as a tragedy, or because there is something problematic in Anna's characterization which

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[29]Harold Bloom, Introduction to Leo Tolstoy's Anna Karenina. Harold Bloom, ed. New York: Chelsea House, 1987: 6.

[30]Robert L. Jackson, "Chance and Design in Anna Karenina." In Harold Bloom, ed. Leo Tolstoy's Anna Karenina. New York: Chelsea House, 1987: 33-34, 34.

[31]Martin Price, in Bloom, ed.

[32]E. B. Greenwood, Tolstoy: The Comprehensive Vision (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975), 117-118.

[33]D. H. Lawrence, from Study of Thomas Hardy, in Henry Gifford, ed. Leo Tolstoy. A Critical Anthology, Hammondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1971: 149-151, p. 150.

[34]Barbara Hardy, The Appropriate Form. Chapter 4. London, 1964.

[35]Robert L. Jackson, "Chance and Design in Anna Karenina," in Bloom, ed.: 33-44, 34.

causes resistance to designating her fall as tragic?

The issue of tragic form and the novel and the subversion of realism's embrace of the random and prosaic by means of an overarching poetic design cannot be adequately addressed here. The question of Anna's heroic stature is essential to formulating a feminist reading of the novel, as we have seen, and thus turns the critical discussion in a new direction.

3. Who is a Heroine?

The notion of heroinism itself is problematized by gender, to the extent that Armstrong feels it necessary to elevate Anna to the level of "hero, while leaving it to Kitty, Masha and Natasha to remain mere heroines. In other words, Anna transcends the constraints of her gender...." (120) Although this statement is meant "to mount a feminist defense," of the novel, it is itself anti-feminist. Anna must cross over gender boundaries and cross-dress as a masculine hero, since Armstrong denies the heroic quality of the kinds of deeds that a heroine may be called upon to undertake. Armstrong's statement implies a superiority of masculine heroism over feminine heroinism and denies a female model for heroinic activity that we would recognize as morally and spiritually equivalent to masculine heroism. Her claims for Anna's heroism involve her "masculinization," as Armstrong notes that Anna, as a writer, wields the pen, notorious emblem of the male member, and engages in the study of architecture, economics, and physics, traditionally male areas of knowledge. Armstrong further argues that Anna acts like a male hero in the sense developed by Propp and defined by Lotman as the transgressor of boundaries. Thus, Armstrong overlooks the path taken by many feminist critics, of searching for female-based alternatives to male-defined patterns and paradigms; for example, maternal vs. paternal models in the "anxieties of influence," or, in this case, a narrative model for female heroinism.

In considering the ways in which a paradigm of heroinism has emerged in modern literature in tandem with heroism, Brownstein has commented: "The paradigmatic hero is an overreacher; the heroine of the domestic novel...is overdetermined. The hero moves toward a goal; the heroine tries to be it."[36] The static and passive role of the heroine in a hero-centered text was described in Lotman's plot typology and was subsequently criticized as phallogocentric by de Lauretis.[37] The Soviet semiotician, Olga Friedenberg, has suggested that the basic mythological motif of descent and ascent is often overtly constituted as a figure of

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[36]Rachel M. Brownstein, Becoming a Heroine. Reading about Women in Novels. New York: Penguin, 1982: 82.

[37]Yury Lotman, "The Origin of Plot in the Light of Typology," Poetics Today 1 (1979): 161-184. Teresa de Lauretis, "Desire in Narrative," in Alice Doesn't. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978.

copulation and reproduction.[38] In all of the above typologies, the feminine principle constitutes the inert, spatial ground for the masculine heroic action.

However, there are equally antique, classical and mythological heroine-centered models of narrative, for example, psyche or Persephone, whose activity, transgression, and fulfillment of heroic deeds resemble those of classical heros, yet who must be interpreted differently because of their sex. In her chapter on "Women Heroes and Patriarchal Culture," Edwards argues that

> the woman hero is an image of antithesis. Different from the male--her sex her sign--she threatens his authority and that of the system he sustains.... The woman hero uncovers fractures in the surface of reality, contradictions in its structure, gaps in its social ideology.[39]

Since the return of the hero signals the restoration of social order and balance, the hero himself must function as an emblem of authority and must combat his rebellious and subversive selves in the form of his shadow or demonic alter ego. Therefore, a hero cannot represent the most menacing threat to patriarchal authority, since, taken as an amalgam with his shadow, he (hero and shadow) already constitutes a balanced figure of equilibrium. The heroine, however, is already constituted as "other" and represents the anarchic forces which threaten to undo order. Therefore, subversion is "a job for the woman hero, for in patriarchy, femaleness is the ultimate and ineradicable sign of marginality."[40]

What kinds of heroinic behavior can be fulfilled by a novelistic heroine? Evans argues that Anna cannot be elevated to the status of a heroine "since we might expect at best some evidence that a heroine attempts to rise above her fate," and Anna "offers no model of how women might resist the strictures of conventional patriarchal authority."[41] It is difficult not to feel that the kinds of feminist criticism which require that a heroine be a satisfactory role model have not evolved much beyond Richardson's demand in his 1759 Preface to Clarissa, that a heroine be an "exemplar to her sex." This prerequisite leaves it up to the

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[38]Olga Friedenberg, "Three Plots or the Semantics of One: Shakespeare's The Taming of the Shrew," in Formalism: History, Comparison, Genre. Russian Poetics in Translation No. 5 (1978): 30-51.

[39]Lee Edwards, Psyche as Hero, Female Heroism and Fictional Form. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1984: 4.

[40]Edwards, p. 9.

[41]Evans, 83.

critics' own moral code to define the exemplary: a virtuous and compliant subject of the patriarchy or a militant and potent liberationist. Arguing against a similar judgement brought on Nora in Ibsen's A Doll's House, Templeton comments:

> Nora falls short according to unnamed, "self-evident" criteria for a feminist heroine, among which would seem to be one, some, or all of the following: an ever-present serious-mindedness; a calm, unexcitable temperament;...perfect sincerity and honesty; and a thoroughgoing selflessness. For A Doll House to be feminist, it would, apparently, have to be a kind of fourth-wall morality play with a saintly Everyfeminist as heroine, not this...excitable, confused, and desperate--in short, human--Nora.[42]

The type of argumentation one would have to pursue to debate this issue further would curiously resemble discussions of Socialist Realist art, with its demand to depict perfectivized men and women of the future, if there were no ideal role models to be found among the men and women of contemporary society.

Were there no candidates worthy to be represented as the heroine of a novel in Russian society of the 1870s? Is there no heroine, therefore, in Anna Karenina?

It may be argued that Anna's claim to heroinism is denied because of her gender and the nature of the avenue of escape open to her in her attempt to "rise above her condition." If she is forgiven her sexual transgression, she is never excused for abandoning her son and ignoring her daughter. But is she judged by the same criteria as a hero who might act similarly? A hero who abandons his impoverished family in Ireland to pursue his muse in Europe (Stephen Daedelus), or who leaves his wife and children to seek higher education (Jude the Obscure), or who even sells his wife and child into bondage with no higher goal in mind (the Mayor of Casterbridge) will be read as heroically shaking free of the mundane and will not be criticized as severely as a heroine who acts in the same way. Consider Irving Howe's (by now infamous) commentary on The Mayor of Casterbridge:

> To shake loose from one's wife; to discard that drooping rag of a woman, with her mute complaints and maddening passivity; to escape not by slinking abandonment but through the public sale of her body to a

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[42]Joan Templeton, "The Doll House Backlash: Criticism, Feminism, and Ibsen," PMLA 104, January 1989: 28-40, 33.

> stranger, as horses are sold at a fair; and thus to wrest, through sheer amoral wilfulness, a second chance out of life--it is with this stroke, so insidiously attractive to male fantasy, that The Mayor of Casterbridge begins.[43]

Not only does Howe elevate the criminal sale into slavery over the more common action of abandonment (which would at least have left the woman free, eventually even to re-marry), he does not even acknowledge the existence of the daughter whose body is also sold. This oversight suggests the common prejudice that paternal instinct, if it exists at all, in no way resembles the power of maternal instinct. In the stereotyped view of parental roles, paternity is primarily seen as a condition of often oppressive responsibility, depriving the male of the freedom to pursue his true path in life, while maternity, by contrast, is considered to be the only fulfilling path in life for a woman, whose maternal instinct will induce in her a state of selflessness and willing sacrifice.

In the continental tradition of the novel of adultery, motherhood is rarely a significant even in the heroine's life--recall Mme. Bovary's indifference to her children once she realized she could not afford the pleasure of purchasing a lavish layette. Most continental novels separate the passion of the adulterous woman from the passion of motherhood, perhaps representing a fissure in social perceptions of women's potential to fulfill multiple roles. As Tanner has commented:

> The wife and mother in one set of social circumstances should not, and cannot be, the mistress and lover in another. It is well known how bourgeois society tends to enforce unitary roles on its members.... From the point of view of that society, adultery introduces a bad multiplicity within the requisite unities of social roles.[44]

Tolstoy's depiction of an adulterous heroine who is both passionately maternal (at least in the first half of the novel[45]) as well as sexual thus

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[43]Cited in Elaine Showalter, "The Unmanning of the Mayor of Casterbridge," in Dale Kramer, ed. Critical Approaches to the Fiction of Thomas Hardy. London: Macmillan, 1979: 99-115.

[44]Tanner, 12-13.

[45]Much has been made of the fact that Anna apparently has little maternal love for her daughter, Ani. This, together with her rejection of future child-bearing through contraception, is taken as a sign of her depravity and loss of maternal instinct. We ought to remember that, having almost died in her last childbed, medical counsel probably advised her to avoid future pregnancies.

represents that threatening combination of maternity and sexuality which the Western Judeo-Christian ethic has sought to fragment. Within this ideology, a good woman is a good mother--that is, endowed with a proper maternal instinct which supercedes and eclipses all other drives. Evans argues, in keeping with some recent feminist theory,[46] that the experience of maternity automatically generates higher moral values, a "woman's way of knowing" and a "different voice of a caring morality."[47] This approach to theorizing the maternal runs the risk of essentializing and biologizing the experience of maternity to a degree that is virtually proto-fascistic. In this view taken to its extreme, it is not that a good woman is a mother, but a mother who, necessarily, is a good woman, one who, by mothering, creates a higher moral sphere for her children without subverting or threatening the patriarchal system within which she unavoidably exists.[48]

According to these criteria, Evans elects Dolly the true heroine of Anna Karenina, because she endures her oppression in the patriarchy, because she is maternal to the exclusion of her own interests and needs, and because she holds to a morality unconstrained by social mores, for example, she visits Anna in spite of the social stigma attached. Of course, we cannot put too much weight on this visit, since the fact that the two women are related lifts the taboo against private visits between households. Ultimately, when Anna most needs her, Dolly lets her down, feeling it more important to counsel Kitty about breastfeeding than to respond to Anna's obvious distress.

Other critics have suggested that Anna felt an unconscious rivalry with a child of her own sex, and could only be gratified by the adulation of a male child (see Armstrong). However, while there is no question that Anna does not love Ani as she loved Seryozha, this does not necessarily imply an absence of maternal feeling. Just as an infertile woman who desperately longs for children of her own finds the actual presence of other people's children intolerable, so Ani is a continual, painful reminder to Anna that she has lost Seryozha:

> "[She] went to the nursery. 'Why, this is wrong--this isn't he! Where are his blue eyes, his sweet shy smile?' was her first thought when she saw her chubby, rosy-cheeked little girl with her black, curly hair...."

Anna Karenina, trans. C. Garnett, ed. and intro. L. J. Kent and N. Berberova. New York: Modern Library, 1965: 794.

[46]See Nancy Chodorow, The Reproduction of Mothering. Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978.

[47]Mary Belenky, Blythe Clichy, Nancy Goldberger, and Jill Tarule, Women's Ways of Knowing. New York: Basic, 1987.

[48]Other feminist critics attack the "idealization of motherhood" in both its feminist and anti-feminist forms, as an attempt to romanticize traditional female spheres of influence as idyllic realms of desexualized and powerless feminity. See, for example, Jessica Benjamin, The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination. New York: Pantheon, 1988.

For different reasons, Morson has suggested that "Dolly Oblonskaya is Tolstoy's moral compass,"[49] and appoints her the "hero" of Anna Karenina "if by the hero of a book, we mean the character who best exemplifies its governing values."[50] For Morson, however, it is the texture and warp of Dolly's life which is as significant as her social and moral status as the embodiment of the Victorian ideal of the Angel in the House. Morson reads Anna Karenina as a novel exalting and exemplifying the prosaic and prosaics, and finds Dolly's eventless, plotless, and "excessivement terre-à-terre" existence to be the most prosaically effaced testament to the quotidian and minute processes of life celebrated by the novel. In this sense, Morson seems to imply that Dolly shares the same features as the saintly Praskovya Mikhailovna of Father Sergius.

While Dolly is unquestionably one of the positive characters of the novel, one could certainly argue contra Evans that she does not succeed in creating a desirable moral atmosphere for her children. They will grow up in a home based on a hypocritical, fictitious marriage and, as they mature, will increasingly recognize their mother's passive enslavement to a patriarchal society and an abusive husband. In fact, it is very difficult to read Dolly as a sister of the exalted Angels in the House of Victorian fiction. Compared to those warm, rotund, matronly queens, surrounded by a bevy of adoring children who lovingly clasp their mother's neck and thick curls with chubby fingers. Dolly is strikingly emaciated and worn, a hack dray-horse among sleek thoroughbreds; surrounded not by plump cherubs, but by dirty, misbehaving urchins. The neat, tidy and cosy domestic arrangements of the Dickensian or Trollopian matron--the bubbling teapot, lovingly netted slippers warming before a crckling fire, hearty but simple meals of clotted cream and home-baked sconès, are reflected ironically in Dolly's desperate attempts to feed and clothe her children, in their reckless play with milk and jam, and in her moment of humiliation, when her patched bedjacket "of which she had been so proud at home" puts her to shame in front of the servants at Vronsky's estate.

In the case of Dolly, as with his later descriptions of the burdens of pregnancy, childbirth, and child-rearing, Tolstoy does not idealize or romanticize, he realizes--that is, he exposes the cult of domesticity for what it is: an oppression of woman and a denial of her selfhood constituted on a myth of the glories of maternity and housekeeping. In this sense, Morson's characterization of Dolly as the embodiment of the prosaic, is closer to the truth. But does she represent the values that the novel espouses? Assuming, as Morson does, that the novel attacks the notion of romantic passion, a close examination of Dolly's own views on love and marriage, the same views which sustain

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[49]Gary Saul Morson, "Prosaics. An Approach to the Humanities." The American Scholar. Autumn, 1988: 515-528, p. 523.

[50]Gary Saul Morson, "Prosaics in Anna Karenina," Tolstoy Studies Journal vol. 1, 1988: 1-12, p. 4.

her, make this assertion problematic.

The positive perception of domestic life in the novel is presented by Lyovin, just as Dolly's idealization is achieved through Lyovin's eyes, for whom she represents "that picture of family life his imagination had painted,"[51] an ideal of domesticity in which Lyovin is destined to be dis-illusioned. When Lyovin fantasizes about his future family life, a vision clearly derived from Victorian literary models,[52] he "actually pictured to himself first the family, and only secondarily the woman who would give him a family."[53] The actual woman herself and the notion of an intimate relationship is irrelevant, such that any of the three Shcherbatsky sisters would have done for his wife. Yet, since even Lyovin is disillusioned in his experience of family happiness, we expect even greater disillusionment on Dolly's part. Yet, although humiliated and impoverished by Stiva's affairs, she allows herself to be deluded as to the true nature of their marriage, and thus colludes in the Victorian myth of marriage as told by Anna,

> Such men are unfaithful, but their own home and wife are sacred to them. Somehow or other these women are still looked on with contempt by them, and do not touch on their feeling for their family. They draw a sort of line that can't be crossed between them and their families....
>
> I saw Stiva when he was in love with you. I remember the time when he came to me and cried, talking of you, and all the poetry and loftiness of his feeling for you, and I know that the longer he has lived with you, the loftier you have been in his eyes.... You have always been a divinity for him, and you are that still, and this has not been an infidelity of the

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[51]Anna Karenina, 282.

[52]I stress the primacy of Victorian literary models for the creation of a Russian myth of childhood. As Andrew Wachtel has recently demonstrated (The Battle for Childhood. Creation of a Russian Myth. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1990). Tolstoy's own autobiographical novel, Childhood, served as the basis for the subsequent development of an idealized vision of family life in Russian literature. Although Wachtel minimizes the importance of European, and especially Victorian literary models for the subsequent development of that myth in Russian literature, since "almost every account of childhood published in Russian after 1852 turned to Tolstoy (and not to Rousseau, Dickens, Töpffer, or others) for inspiration," (44) Tolstoy's own myth of Childhood was clearly constructed, or as Wilson puts it, "copperfielded," on the Western model.

[53]Anna Karenina, 101.

heart...[54]

That Dolly still believes in the bourgeois myth of romantic love and marriage despite her awareness of its failures, is evidenced in her reactions at Kitty's wedding:

> [Dolly] was deeply moved. The tears stood in her eyes, and she could not have spoken without crying. She was...going back in thought to her own wedding, she glanced at the radiant figure of Stepan Arkadevich, forgot the present, and remembered only her own innocent love. She recalled not only herself, but all the women she was intimate with or with whom she was acquainted. She thought of them on the day of their triumph, when they had stood like Kitty under the wedding crown, with love and hope and dread in their hearts, renouncing the past and stepping forward into the mysterious future. Among the brides that came back to her memory, she thought too of her darling Anna, of whose proposed divorce she had just been hearing. And she had stood just as innocent in orange flowers and bridal veil. And now? "It's terribly strange," she thought.[55]

Dolly's description of the transition from maidenhood to married estate curiously echoes the romanticized narrative, complete with reference to the most romantic of topoi, the Alps, that Anna had spun to Kitty's wonder earlier in the novel:

> "Oh! How good it is to be your age!" pursued Anna. "I remember, and I know that blue haze like the mist on the mountains in Switzerland. That mist which covers everything in that blissful time when childhood is just ending, and out of that vast circle, happy and gay, there is a path growing narrower and narrower.... Who has not been through it?"[56]

Dolly's romantic, if disturbed, reverie at the wedding is contrasted by Tolstoy to the conversation of the common women who observe the ceremony

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[54]Anna Karenina, 76.

[55]Anna Karenina, 479.

[56]Anna Karenina, 79.

from the doorway. Speaking as a true community of women, they speculate as to whether the bride is being married against her will, or for money, and flinch at "how the deacon rumbles, 'Fear your husband'." No one asserts that the marriage is for love (perhaps an unconvincing notion), and the concluding comment, "What a pretty dear the bride is--like a lamb all decked out [for the slaughter]! Well, say what you will, we women feel sorry for our sister,"[57] expresses folkloric wisdom on the realities of married life in stark contrast to Dolly's sentimentalizing.

Dolly's seemingly heroic endurance is thus exposed as based on the same dangerous bourgeois delusions of romantic love that drive Anna Karenina's passion.

In fact, Dolly represents the "inauthenticity of maternal thinking" characterized by Ruddick as:

> a willingness to remain blind.... Maternal thought embodies inauthenticity by taking on the values of the dominant culture.... The strain of colluding in one's own powerlessness, coupled with the frequent and much greater strain of betraying the children one has tended [by raising them to perpetuate the patriarchy] would be insupportable if conscious.[58]

In depicting Dolly, Tolstoy drew yet one more portrait of the victimization of woman: a spiritual rather than a physical death, a life based on lies, self-deception, dissimulation, and ultimately, on cowardice.

4. Conclusions

Ultimately, both the feminist readings of Anna Karenina reviewed here deny Anna's status as a unique woman: Evans, because Anna does not perform as the kind of maternal and sisterly woman her ethical code of feminism demands; Armstrong, because she conceptualizes women's actions as potent only when masquerading as men's. Since both critics concur in viewing Tolstoy as overtly misogynist, they must either develop a strategy for reconsidering the traditional values of domesticity within feminist terms (Evans), or must argue that Tolstoy's unconscious desires granted Anna a force and vitality that survives her textual extinction (Armstrong).

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[57]Ėkaja miločka nevesta-to, kak ovečka ubrannaja! A kak ni govorite, žalko našu sestru." Anna Karenina, 479.

[58]Sara Ruddick, "Maternal Thinking," in Barrie Thorne and Marilyn Yalom, eds. Rethinking the Family. London: Longman, 1982: 84-5. See also her later work, Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace. Boston: Beacon, 1989.

Perhaps we need a feminist reading of Anna that will liberate her from the sex-based roles and stereotypes that generate certain evaluative responses in feminist and non-feminist critics, without overlooking the specific differences in her experiences that her gender entails. Feminist criticism of Anna is needed that neither sutures femininity to maternity nor masculinizes it.

The first words we hear Anna speak in the novel are that she takes, "not the Petersburg view, but a woman's view." We might realize that she means, not just "women's views," but "a woman's view," a woman who follows her own, proximate and imperiled experience of motherhood, marriage, passion, and death. Even though her trajectory through the novel is highly plotted according to the narratives of romance and ruin, her failures and her sufferings are unique to her self.

If ideological criticism of this novel has foundered on any one problem, it is on the need to take Anna on her own terms, of which her gender is an essential element, but an element which should not be allowed to essentialize her, or the meaning of her narrative.