WSU Libraries
Student Research Excellence Award
Application Cover Sheet

Name       Alison Kirpes
Title of Paper/Project From Hroclot to Human Being: The Revised Anna Karenina
Mailing Address
E-mail
Phone
Student ID #
Class standing senior
Major English teaching

Contact information for faculty member supporting this application

Faculty member’s name Birgitta Ingemanson
Faculty member’s department Foreign Language and Literature
Faculty member’s phone
Faculty member’s e-mail

Name of course for which work was completed UH 450 - Honors Thesis
Department and course number University Honors 450
When course was taken spring 2008 - thesis written during fall 2007

If I win the Award, I agree to contribute materials to an exhibit on my research for display in the WSU Libraries. I also agree that this paper will become the property of The Libraries; winning papers will be added to the WSU Research Exchange (online research and publication repository).

Signature Alison Kirpes Date 2/26/08
Alison Kirpes  
February 29, 2008  
WSU Library Research Award  

An Evolution: My Use of Library Materials and Research Strategies  

Library materials were essential within my research strategies for my Honors Thesis, “From Harlot to Human Being: The Revised Anna Karenina.” I explored the reasoning behind Leo Tolstoy’s revision of the character of Anna in his novel, Anna Karenina. Originally, Tolstoy condemns Anna for her adultery, describing her as so ugly as to be almost deformed. In this first draft, she is a devil, a physical representation of the sin she committed. However, through ten drafts, Tolstoy changes Anna into a beautiful, charming victim of a corrupt society. I wondered what had prompted Tolstoy to revise his first draft so drastically. I found it shocking that a misogynistic, traditional man could create a character, condemn her, and then rewrite her into a heroine, looking past her sins.  

Since the revisions of the character and of the novel have been largely ignored in studies of the novel, I found no answers spelled out for me. As I could not rely on others’ scholars works on this issue – because they didn’t address the revisions – I embarked on my own research of primary documents to discover how his conversion influenced his views and the revisions.  

Due to the autobiographical nature of the work, I focused my research on Tolstoy’s life to explore any influences which may have impacted him during this time. This research took place almost exclusively through books and articles obtained through the Washington State University library. Through translations of Tolstoy’s diaries, as well as his wife’s, I found that much of his radical religious and philosophical conversion
took place during this time and influenced the novel. From these diaries I was able to compare how the novel drew from Tolstoy’s life, down to minute details of his proposal to his wife. Sofia Tolstoy’s diaries provided a perspective of how Tolstoy changed during this time period due to the deaths within their family and how these deaths led to his conversion. These diaries and compilations of letters written by the Tolstoys described Tolstoy’s changing views during this time and after his conversion. I was then able to understand how these views were illustrated in the novel and the impact they had.

I scoured biographies for other scholars’ interpretations of Tolstoy’s life during this time. I found that many of these scholars drew upon the same diary entries and letters which I had found. From the library I found compilations of letters which Tolstoy had written throughout his life which illustrated his changing views at the time. I also read and compared works written by him before and after his conversion, such as *Family Happiness* and *What Men Live By* to better understand the enormity of the change which took place in his life.

To gain a context for the novel, I researched information on the Russian social structure of the time, the 1870s. From these books and articles, I was able to understand how Tolstoy’s views fit in with the traditional views of the time. I was also then able to understand how the changing social structure of the 1870s alarmed Tolstoy and influenced his conversion, and subsequently, the novel.

I also read scholarly criticism and interpretations of the novel as a whole to understand wider perspectives, though few scholars so much as mentioned the revisions. Through my research I was able to piece together a clear picture of Tolstoy’s life at the time and how the novel parallels his life. From these parallels, I then understood how his
conversion impacted the changes in the novel. Since very few other scholars have studied why Tolstoy revised the character so dramatically, my findings create a new understanding of the character and of the novel.
From Harlot to Human Being: The Revised Anna Karenina

Alison Kirpes

Spring 2008

Dr. Birgitta Ingemanson

Department of Foreign Languages and Cultures

Washington State University
Précis

Leo Tolstoy’s novel Anna Karenina has been traditionally viewed as a moral treatise on adultery. However, this shallow approach misses Tolstoy’s criticism of the hypocritical customs of Russian high society and does not explain his many radical revisions of the novel. While researching Tolstoy’s views on women and how they impacted his treatment of the character of Anna, I discovered little explanation for what prompted these revisions. Due to the personal and almost autobiographical nature of Tolstoy’s writing, I therefore also investigated the events which occurred in his life during the writing of this novel to learn how his religious and philosophical conversion may have changed his views – and the novel. I found that an understanding of Tolstoy and his changing views is crucial to gaining a true understanding of Anna Karenina.

Tolstoy lived in a patriarchal culture and this traditional structure must be examined in order to establish a context for the novel. His traditional views are illustrated in the novel, although his conversion illustrates how his views change over time and, in turn, influence his writing of the novel.

I closely analyzed Anna Karenina and paralleled excerpts from both the first drafts and the finished work with Tolstoy’s life in the 1870s. Translated diaries, letters, and biographies added to my understanding of Tolstoy and the novel. I chose to focus greatly on Tolstoy’s life thanks to the influence of his life on the novel.

Through this research I found that Tolstoy’s philosophical and religious conversion led to more tolerance and compassion in his life, which is reflected within the revisions of the novel. These revisions illustrate how Tolstoy does not condemn Anna, but instead condemns the customs of the high society for their hypocrisy in condemning
her and for the superficiality of their lives. Through his religious conversion, he began to believe that the life of hard agricultural work in the country was closer to the ideals of biblical proverbs, and therefore more holy. The frivolous city life, however, he viewed as corrupting. This corruption is what Tolstoy condemns in the novel. Through the character of Anna, he illustrates how one must remain true to one’s own conscience and not the conscience of a false society. Tolstoy’s conversion thus led to the revisions in which he shifted blame from Anna to the society around her.

These results add to the scholarship already in the field, with the added perspective of the influence of Tolstoy’s conversion on his writing of *Anna Karenina*. After this novel, he wrote works only on moral and religious themes. The impact of Tolstoy’s conversion on his life and on his later works is widely documented, but the impact of it on his revisions of *Anna Karenina* is less studied. Like the person Tolstoy, himself, his writing is complicated with many layers. Future research will likely reveal even deeper layers within this text, further adding to the understanding of the novel.
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results and Discussion</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

Leo Tolstoy’s novel Anna Karenina follows a high-society Russian woman whose affair leads to her expulsion from society and subsequent suicide. The societal scorn she faces, along with her suicide, have commonly been seen by critics as a punishment for her adultery. Traditionally, the novel has been read as a misogynistic conservative commentary on the family structure of the 1870s, with Tolstoy condemning Anna’s actions and punishing her for her sins. The domestic characters in the novel, such as Dolly and Kitty, are generally viewed by critics to be intended to serve as role models for women. However, Anna Karenina, as well as some of Tolstoy’s other writings, illustrates Tolstoy’s complex views on the woman question. These views are expressed through Tolstoy’s revisions of the character of Anna. An understanding of these changing views leads to a greater depth of understanding of the novel. Tolstoy’s religious and philosophical conversion leads to a radical change in his beliefs and in the novel, though he still follows many traditional views of the family structure. Through paralleling his life and the novel, I was able to explain the connection between his conversion and the revisions. This adds to the understanding of the novel as the reasoning behind these revisions had been little explored before this thesis.

In Russia in the 1870s, the family structure was patriarchal and authoritarian, largely based on tradition. A woman in this time period was expected to marry, have children, and raise a family.¹ Tolstoy believed work outside the home is demeaning to women, just as it is to men. He believed hard agricultural work in the fields or domestic work in the home was the highest calling for men and women as it remained closest to

biblical proverbs.\textsuperscript{2} The patriarch ruled the household, though his wife often managed it. Marriages were generally decided by the parents as an agreement between two households; love had little to do with marriage. Though in the late 1800s Russia was rapidly becoming more westernized and the family structure was changing, ideas of sex, marriage, and family were still considered private issues.\textsuperscript{3} Tolstoy agrees with many of these traditional views; his criticism of the corrupting society is harsh.

Tolstoy criticized Russian high society and city life, following his belief that the ideal life existed in the country performing hard labor. A frivolous life in the city did not allow for honesty to oneself, a trait Tolstoy believed to be essential. This belief can be seen in Tolstoy’s own life as after a dissolute youth he retreated to his country estate, Yasnaya Polyana. Anna Karenina can be read as a scathing criticism against the upper class, highlighting society’s entrapment of women. Tolstoy viewed some high-class marriages as institutionalized prostitution, a view expressed in the novel. He paints Anna as a sympathetic character, unable to be true to herself because of society’s corruption.

Anna Karenina marks a change in Tolstoy’s writing. Prior to writing this novel, his writing focused on art, while afterward he focused on religious and moral writings. His views on women also changed with time. Tolstoy underwent a radical religious conversion during the writing of Anna Karenina in which he searched for meaning in life and faith. After his conversion, he believed both women and men should remain celibate.\textsuperscript{4} Tolstoy’s changing and complicated views add complexity to the novel and these complexities must be noted, not ignored.

\textsuperscript{3} Boris Mironov, 170-172, 175.
\textsuperscript{4} Leo Tolstoy, Tolstoy’s Diaries, 308
Research Question or Hypothesis

How do Tolstoy’s changing philosophical and religious beliefs shape the revisions of Anna Karenina and his treatment of women in the novel, and what does this treatment of women in the novel illustrate?

Methodology

I began my research focusing on how Tolstoy’s views on women and the family structure were illustrated in Anna Karenina, but during my research I came across a note in a biography on Tolstoy which changed my topic. This note mentioned that Tolstoy had made ten drafts of the first book of Anna Karenina, and radically revised Anna. I wondered what prompted this dramatic change and then began researching to explain this revision.

I used existing scholarly interpretations on the novel to gain different perspectives on the character of Anna and Tolstoy’s intentions behind her death. However, I drew upon these interpretations only to inspire further research and to support my ideas. These interpretations did not study Tolstoy’s reasoning behind his revisions or what prompted them, that I discovered myself through comparing his life and the novel.

To understand Anna Karenina, one must first understand Tolstoy. Though some literary theories advocate a strict adherence to the text alone without regard for the author’s life, these theories should not apply to Tolstoy due to the overwhelmingly personal nature of his writing, especially in Anna Karenina. Throughout the novel he appears in the representation of the character Konstantin Levin and exhorts on many issues important to him at the time. In a letter to his friend Strakhov while writing the novel, he explains his approach by saying, “In everything I have written I have been
guided by the need to gather together ideas written for the purpose of self-expression.\textsuperscript{5} Therefore, in studying this novel I also studied Tolstoy through autobiographical and biographical works.

I researched the novel through a close analysis of \textit{Anna Karenina} both in its entirety and in specific passages. I used the recent, trustworthy translation by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky for all reading of the novel and all citations of \textit{Anna Karenina} in this thesis are from this edition. As I am not familiar with the Russian language, I used English translations of all of Tolstoy’s works for my research. Through a comparison with Tolstoy’s life, I was able to draw parallels between the novel and personal events in his own life, particularly his religious and philosophical conversion. I also paid strong attention to how Tolstoy describes the women in the novel and their roles. I examined the domestic lives of Dolly and Kitty in contrast to Anna’s public life and the society lives of other high-class women. I also recorded details which indicated Tolstoy’s views on women, as well as overarching themes of society’s impact on women’s lives. I analyzed the role of women in all marriages in the novel—unhappy and happy, high and lower class, rural and urban. Scenes illustrating the corruption of city life on women were also explored, particularly Anna’s life in Petersburg and Moscow, including her suicide.

A close reading of Tolstoy’s diaries allows for a first-person account of his changing beliefs, both on religion and the role of women. The diaries illustrate his sexism toward women in his youth and his fervent desire to change his womanizing.

gambling, and drinking ways. The diaries allow insight both to Anna Karenina and to shorter works created before this novel, such as the novella Family Happiness, written in 1859. Sadly, Tolstoy wrote few diary entries during his work on Anna Karenina, likely due to both the strenuous undertaking of the novel and its autobiographical nature. However, entries written before and after this time illustrate the impact of Tolstoy’s life on the novel.

Many biographies provide background information on Tolstoy’s life, and I found Henri Troyat’s Tolstoy particularly useful to establish a context for the novel. The extensive information on Tolstoy’s conversion and religious journey was especially helpful to me during research. In addition, Troyat backs up his biography with frequent quotations from Tolstoy’s autobiographical works and novels.

The novella Family Happiness gives a perspective of Tolstoy’s view of the ideal family life from before his marriage. Many aspects of the novella foreshadow events of Anna Karenina, such as the marriage of a younger woman to an older man and their subsequent unhappy marriage. The novella concludes with the wife finding contentment in her place as a mother in the domestic sphere, something Anna fails to do. Written twenty five years before Anna Karenina, Family Happiness, with its ironic title, offers a glimpse into Tolstoy’s acknowledgement of the possible failings of marriage and its subsequent entrapment of women.

A compilation of letters written by Tolstoy also adds to the first-person perspective of his views about women and about Anna Karenina. Letters written to Nikolai Strakhov reflect Tolstoy’s views about his treatment of women, particularly Anna, in the novel. Tolstoy also reveals the influence of ancient Greek philosophers and
the German 19th-century philosopher Schopenhauer. These primary accounts allow for
direct interpretation of Tolstoy’s views and ideas about the novel.

Critical scholarly interpretations of both the novel and Tolstoy’s views also add to
the understanding of Tolstoy’s views on women and how they impact the novel. I have
analyzed and evaluated conflicting interpretations in order to understand arguments from
both sides.

Framing ‘Anna Karenina’ by Amy Mandelker assisted in providing a different
perspective on Tolstoy, that of a feminist Tolstoy. While some of her assertions are far-
FETCHED and do not take into account all of Tolstoy’s views, the main point of Tolstoy not
condemning Anna is well-supported. This piece adds to a more robust understanding of
Tolstoy and his views on women.

The Unsaid ‘Anna Karenina’ by Judith Armstrong provides both a traditional
perspective on Tolstoy’s views on women in the novel and a unique perspective on
Tolstoy himself in his relations with women. Armstrong argues that Tolstoy has an
Oedipus Complex from the death of his mother at age two, and subsequently falls in love
with his mother. She proposes that in the novel, Kitty, the wife of Levin, Tolstoy’s stand-
in, is looked upon as a mother figure rather than as a lover. While this perspective is
interesting, I find it based in assumption and not adequately supported. What I did find
useful as a contrast is the author’s more traditional view of the novel: Tolstoy’s
glorification of domestic life and the moralizing tone of Anna’s suicide.

Sydney Schultze’s book The Structure of Anna Karenina explores in several
chapters Tolstoy’s treatment of Anna in the novel. Schultze inspired me to expand my
exploration of Anna’s character, supporting my hypothesis that Tolstoy did not condemn
Anna in the novel. While I did not agree completely with all of Schultze’s assertions, I found this text to be helpful in supporting my idea of Anna as a heroine and not as a sinner.

I also studied historical accounts of the family structure and the role of women in the time period to establish a context for Tolstoy’s views. *A Social History of Imperial Russia* by Boris Mironov outlines and explains the traditional life of both peasants and nobility, providing a perspective from which to draw my conclusions. This book also explores the changing ideas of family which Tolstoy responds to in the novel. From this text I was better able to understand the culture of the time period in which Tolstoy lived.
Results and Discussion

The complex nature of *Anna Karenina* and its themes is not always completely understood. Many critics treat the novel as a moralizing sermon on the dangers of adultery. On occasion, it is dismissed as a family soap-opera. The novel may also be viewed as a treatise on the traditional place of women and the consequences of women’s departure from this role. Thanks to the complexity of the novel, a simple interpretation of *Anna Karenina* as a moralistic sermon or soap-opera does disservice to the author, the work, and even the reader. The novel has many layers and modern critics often only skim the surface of these layers, missing much of Tolstoy’s imbedded criticism of Russian high society. A result of my research is that Tolstoy’s views of women as expressed in *Anna Karenina* are more progressive than commonly thought and that the novel is less of a condemnation of one woman’s sins and more a critique of the customs of Russian high society as a whole.

The complexity of the novel and its themes of social critique are not often understood. Tolstoy himself says that he cannot put the gist of the novel into words. In a letter to Strakhov in 1876, he writes, “But if I were to try to say in words everything that I intended to express in my novel, I would have to write the same novel I wrote in the beginning.”5 Therefore, to understand the main issues of the novel, the careful reader must first understand Tolstoy.

Tolstoy represents himself and his ideals in the character of Levin, allowing the author to elaborate on and explain his views to the readers. The last name Levin comes from the Russian version of Tolstoy’s first name, Lev. Like Tolstoy, Levin lives a life of

womanizing and carousing in his youth before settling down on his country estate. Many
details in the novel are taken directly from Tolstoy’s life. Levin’s courtship of Kitty
follows Tolstoy’s courtship of Sofia Behrs, down to the details of his proposal through a
word game and, on his wedding night, the revealing to his new wife of his former
dissolute life through his diaries. Like Tolstoy, Levin also deals with depression and
despair, ultimately coming to the same conclusion as Tolstoy: the remedy is in religious
or spiritual faith.

**Tolstoy’s Inner Struggle**

During the writing of *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy undergoes a remarkable change, a
conversion, in his philosophical and religious thought, a gradual process without one
single defining moment. However, much of this process takes place during his writing
of *Anna Karenina*. Tolstoy changes greatly from the depraved gambling womanizer of
his youth to a radical religious fanatic with firm beliefs in an unorthodox Christianity.

The change in belief is illustrated in the many revisions Tolstoy makes of the
novel, particularly the ten versions of the first part. When he begins the novel, he holds
generally traditional views, though doubts about faith have plagued him throughout his
adult life. These views influence the writing of his first draft. His intent is to write a
novel about a high-society adulteress, making her pitiful yet condemning her for her sins.

In this first version, Tolstoy epitomizes Anna as a physical representation of sin.
Anna is described as a vulgar, ugly seductress whom he condemns for her adultery. He
writes in the first draft, “She is unattractive, with a narrow, low forehead, short, turned-up

---

6 Leo Tolstoy, *Tolstoy’s Diaries*, 308.
rose, rather large. If it were any bigger, she would be deformed... But, in spite of her homely face, there was something in the kindly smile of her red lips that made her likable." Tolstoy not only describes Anna as physically ugly, he also makes her morally despicable. One chapter devoted to Anna’s description in this early draft is called “The Devil,” bluntly stating how her author views her. The fundamental change of Tolstoy’s views is illustrated in the final version of Anna as innocently beautiful and charming. He describes the curve of her ivory shoulders with love and the unconscious charisma of her smile as if he, too, were bewitched. At the start of the novel, even Dolly’s children flock to her. She is no longer a man-killer, she is instead a victim, a lamb sacrificed to the customs of a superficial society.

In the first draft, Tolstoy highlights Karenin and Vronsky as a moral contrast to Anna, but through his revisions he lifts her up above them. In the first draft, next to these moral beings, Anna looks vile. Tolstoy initially describes Karenin as a generous, loving, sympathetic husband. When he begins to suspect Anna’s infidelity, he cries to his sister, “I feel like sobbing, I want sympathy, I want to be told what to do!” Like Anna, Karenin’s character also changes radically through the revisions. In the final version Tolstoy makes him cold and insensitive, a man living for the sake of appearance only. Tolstoy not only strips Karenin of his high qualities, he divests him of his physical charms. Like Karenin, Vronsky also suffers a downfall. Originally sincere and cultivated, he becomes superficial and artificial, toying with Kitty’s affections with no honest intentions. Next to Karenin and Vronsky, Tolstoy exalts Anna and illustrates through the contrast his views on character. The radical conversion taking place during

this time is also reflected within his final treatment of Anna: he does not condemn her. The change in his views parallels the changes occurring in his life.

According to both Leo’s and Sonya’s diaries in 1873, when he began writing the novel in 1873 they were in a period of peace and relative happiness. However, that year with the death of their infant son, Tolstoy plunges into depression, obsessed with thoughts of death.\textsuperscript{11} The next year, the death of the beloved aunt who raised him deepens his spiritual crisis. In 1875, another infant son dies and a daughter dies a few days after birth.\textsuperscript{12} Soon Tolstoy’s other aunt dies, propelling him into despair and bewilderment at the meaning of life and death. Unable to shake this despair at the emptiness of life, he hides away the ropes and firearms at his home so as to reduce the temptation for suicide.

This depression and obsession with death is seen through the dark symbolism, omens, and deaths within the novel. Anna’s violent suicide at the end of the novel is inspired by a real-life event which occurs at a train station near Tolstoy’s home. In 1872, a year before Tolstoy begins writing Anna Karenina, but after he has begun to think through his ideas, a neighboring woman named Anna Stepanovna becomes consumed with jealousy after her lover abandons her and she throws herself under a train.\textsuperscript{13} Tolstoy goes to the train station the next day to view the autopsy and the violence of the death impresses him deeply. However, he does not piece together this violent death with his novel until after he has already begun the novel. Eventually he gives his main character, and eventually the book, her name. Originally Anna is called Tatyana and his title of the novel is to be either Two Couples or Two Marriages.\textsuperscript{14} The darkness of the

\textsuperscript{13, 14} Troyat 358, 378-380.
neighbor's death influences Tolstoy, and in turn shifts the focus of the novel from Anna as an abomination to a victim of outside forces, nightmares and omens. The author's revisions indicate his views of Anna as a victim of fate, no longer condemning her.

The depression which plagues Tolstoy during the writing of Anna Karenina lessens once he realizes his disillusionment subsides when he accepts faith without questions, like a child. This realization prompts an intense piety after the concluding of the writing of the novel for about a year. In this time, he feels a unity with the peasants and the people through his religious devotions. He fasts two days a week, prays twice daily, and thrills Sonya with his return to attending Mass and accepting Communion.\textsuperscript{15} The year after this piety begins, 1878, is marked by a deep need for tolerance in his life.

Tolstoy's newfound tolerance and compassion manifests itself both with his treatment of Anna and his forgiveness of his longtime literary enemy, Ivan Turgenev.\textsuperscript{16} For many years Tolstoy and Turgenev had parted ways, but in 1878 Tolstoy writes to Turgenev asking for forgiveness and extending an offer of friendship. Shocked, Turgenev accepts and later visits Yasnaya Polyana, the Tolstoy estate.\textsuperscript{16} This tolerance shown to Turgenev reflects the change in Tolstoy's views. He is now able to put aside years of animosity and hatred in order to forgive. This change of views is also seen with his treatment of Anna. Once he condemns her as a devil, but later is able to look past her sins to criticize society instead.

Along with tolerance and compassion, Tolstoy finds an increasing distaste for the superficiality of city life as well as a growing disillusionment with the orthodox church. Through his conversion he feels united with the people of the land, the peasants, and

\textsuperscript{15} Troyat 358, 378-380.
\textsuperscript{16} Leo Tolstoy, Tolstoy's Letters, 318-319.
views their life of hard work as grounded in God. Because they live off the land with little luxury, he views their life as aligning closer with biblical proverbs. Increasingly he views the customs of city life as corrupting and superficial, a view he expresses in Anna Karenina. In 1882, Sonya writes in her diary, “Our life in Moscow would be quite delightful if only it did not make Lyovochka so unhappy. He is too sensitive to survive the city, and his Christian disposition cannot reconcile all this idle luxury with people’s struggling lives here.”\(^{17}\) The distaste of pointless luxury also leads to his departure from the orthodox church, as he cannot rationalize the jewels and gold owned by the church when so many people suffer. His religious conversion leads to his view of the luxury and superficiality of city life as corrupting and to a more compassionate view of the world, including Anna.

**The Struggle of the Conscience**

Tolstoy’s compassionate treatment of Anna reveals his view of her as a victim of a corrupted society. This hypocritical society, not Tolstoy, condemns Anna. His views are expressed through Dolly when she goes to visit the scorned Anna after Anna leaves her husband. Dolly realizes she cannot condemn Anna, saying “I have no opinion, but I’ve always loved you, and when you love someone, you love the whole person, as they are, not how you’d like them to be.”\(^{18}\) By Anna’s conscience, she is right, and to Tolstoy, if she follows her conscience, she is in the right. After his conversion when asked by a young girl, “What is to be done?” he answers her by saying, “What people need most of all is to discover for themselves and develop their own conscience, and then live

\(^{17}\) Sofia Tolstoy, 71.

according to it, and not as everybody else does – take somebody else’s completely foreign, inaccessible conscience and then live without one at all, but lie, lie, lie, in order to look like a person living according to some other person’s conscience.”¹⁹ He portrays Anna as a woman bound by her own conscience to be true to herself, not to the rules of high-class society. However, society cannot accept this. The judgment of society, not the judgment of God, kills Anna.

Anna’s suicide does not equal a condemnation from Tolstoy; instead it shows a strong woman who finds an escape from an oppressive society and manages to stay true and honest to herself. Tolstoy does not see suicide as an act of a weak or deranged person, but calls it an act of “rare men, strong and logical.”²⁰ Tolstoy is also straightforward about life and death, writing that “to live well is to die well. We live, that means we die.”²¹ His practical view of suicide and death reflects how he sees Anna’s suicide not as her downfall, but as a heroic act. In death, she finds liberation, but in life, she can only find a semblance of peace in the country, away from society. Even, then, she is not truly happy, as she cannot completely escape society. The society will remain in place, wherever she goes. Thus, her inner struggle between staying true to herself and the pressure to conform to society’s expectations remains. As she cannot escape society in life, she must escape it in death.

The scene describing her death reflects the influences of both the ancient Greek mythology and the 19th century Schopenhauer which Tolstoy studies in the years immediately prior to writing Anna Karenina.²² The suicide scene in the novel is notable in that it follows a stream of consciousness style long before the style became popular in literature, giving insight to its female character in a way usually reserved for heroic male

¹⁹, ²⁰, ²¹, ²² Tolstoy, Leo. Tolstoy’s Diaries. 230, 202, 183-188.
characters. The internal focus of the suicide scene parallels the focus on ancient Greek heroes, where death is a glorious end rather than something to be feared. The concept of fate also sheds light on Anna’s death. Throughout the novel, Anna seems unable to control her passions, as if she is only a pawn of fate being led to a tragic end. Tolstoy incorporates this view of fate into the novel. He draws on Schopenhauer’s belief in a mysterious force called “the will-to-live” which dominates life. The “will-to-live” strives to continue the species, but often comes into conflict with the body. He views suicide as an affirmation of the will-to-live, a victory for this force over society and even the body it is housed in.²³

Anna realizes this victory when she kills herself and finds faith in the instant before she dies. Tolstoy writes, “Suddenly the darkness that covered everything for her broke and life rose up before her momentarily with all its bright past joys.”²⁴ On her journey to the train station before her suicide, she views everything around her as hideous and believes life to be ugly. “We’re all created in order to suffer,” she says.²⁵ However, after taking the irreversible step to follow her own conscience, she then realizes the beauty of life. She remembers the faith of her childhood, makes the sign of the cross, and finds its faith again, now that she is not caught up in society.

Tolstoy makes a marked point about the decay of society by exploring the happiness of marriages throughout the novel. Very few high-society marriages could be called anything but happy, as most of the characters have committed adultery themselves. Schultze lists the various characters and their marital failures: 23 characters, other than Anna and Vronsky, have affairs mentioned.²⁶ In addition to husbands and wives having

²³ Schultze, 78-79
²⁴, ²⁵ Leo Tolstoy, Anna Karenina 768, 766.
²⁶ Schultze, 100-101
affairs, other failing marriages are mentioned. Tolstoy seems determined to emphasize not Anna’s guilt, but society’s. Anna is not condemned by society for having an affair, but for blatantly flaunting society’s norms of discreet conduct. Having an affair was not considered heinous. Princess Betsy, a cousin of Vronsky’s, even encourages Anna’s affair at the beginning, though when Anna leaves Karenin, Betsy refuses both to see her and to re-introduce her to society, despite the fact that Betsy herself has been having an affair. Many in Anna’s high-class circle know of her affair at the beginning, but find nothing shameful in it until Anna and Vronsky cease to hide their affections.

Anna’s husband, Karenin, responds to her revelation of the affair with a demand not that it stop, but that others be given no reason to talk. He tells her that she is behaving improperly and the “outward conventions of propriety should be observed.”

Anna, however, cannot live according to his conscience or the conscience of the hypocritical society. She finds herself unable to lie about the passion consuming her life. Her disregard for society’s demand for a false front is what offends society, not her affair. What society views as unacceptable is to break apart one’s family and flaunt one’s affair in front of the world, as Countess Vronsky, the mother of Anna’s lover, states in the novel, saying “She ended as such a woman should have ended... her death was itself the death of a vile, irreligious woman.”

Countess Vronsky’s comments represent how hypocritically society views Anna and condemns her, as Countess Vronsky’s conveniently ignores her own numerous past affairs. Society condemns Anna for her truth, and Tolstoy condemns the society for its hypocrisy. Throughout the novel he skewers religious hypocrites such as Karenin. While many other characters in the novel have affairs, none suffer the scandal and social censure that Anna does.

27, 28 Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, 143, 778.
The opera scene in Petersburg after Anna has left Karenin and is living with Vronsky demonstrates the contempt Anna faces from society for her actions. The scene shows her vulnerable in front of society; the point is even made that her shoulders are bare as she stands proudly in the front row of her box. This scene describes Anna’s painful answer to her dilemma of whether to stay true to herself and reveal herself for what she is – an adulteress – or to hide away from society and pretend that their censure does not matter. There is only one answer for Anna. She sees through society’s illusion of righteousness. Her visit to the theater is an act of defiance as she knows well the result of her reappearance in society. Vronsky then recognizes that she feels the shame of a person in the pillory, but Anna’s suffering is evident throughout the novel. Consequently, she is left with pain and hostility from a society that no longer accepts her and that she no longer can accept.

In the opera scene Tolstoy uses the literary technique of estrangement to describe the pretensions of high society. Describing the opera in detail as if it were a strange and unusual custom, he mocks the façade of the opera -- the dresses, the theater, the singers -- and thereby the falseness of the entire society. By breaking the whole down into tiny details as if seen from a distance, Tolstoy trivializes the opera, and by association, society. In the 1870s, the opera dominates the social scene -- but this night, Anna dominates the opera. Indeed, when Vronsky walks in the theater late, he knows where she is by the direction all of the opera glasses were turned. This focus upon her sins, rather than on their own, along with the descriptions of the elaborateness of the opera, illustrates the shallowness of the society. Anna’s internal struggle of living a life devoted

---

to honesty and self-truth is reflected within this scene as a foil to the shallow façade of high society.

Taking a biblical cue, Tolstoy suggests that society should not condemn without first examining themselves. The epigraph “Vengeance is mine; I shall repay” refers not to Anna’s death as vengeance for her sins as is commonly asserted, but to the scriptural passage Romans 12: 19-21, in which Paul asks listeners to leave punishment to God. As Tolstoy reveals throughout the novel, Anna is not condemned by a divine power, but by society. This same quote is used in two English works Tolstoy admired and mentioned in his letters, Phineas Redux by Anthony Trollope and East Lynne by Ellen Wood. In both works, an adulteress uses this quote to spare herself from her husband’s anger. Anna is to be pitied, not judged, especially not by a society condoning adultery and living a life of fake smiles and false pretences. The epigraph reflects Tolstoy’s increasing focus on spiritual matters.

Through his representation in the novel, the character of Konstantin Levin, Tolstoy explains his views on self-truth. The other protagonists of the novel, Levin and Kitty are set as examples of individuals who have found happiness through realization of self-truth. Levin and Kitty realize the dangers of pretense and find true happiness once they accept that they must stay within the realm of their own consciences. Levin doubts his faith throughout the novel, but finds faith in the last few pages as he lies underneath the stars and sums up the novel in its last few sentences: “My life now, my whole life, regardless of all that may happen to me.... is not only not meaningless, as it was before.

but has the unquestionable meaning of the good which it is in my power to put into it!” Levin realizes he must accept himself as he is. Likewise, Kitty also struggles with issues of self after Vronsky’s infatuation with Anna and her own rejection of Levin’s proposal. At a spa abroad, she aspires to a false sense of piety inspired by a newfound friend, but comes to realize she cannot live an insincere life, saying “It was all pretence, it was all contrived and not from the heart... be bad, but at least don’t be a liar, a deceiver!” Kitty is then able to recover her health and return to her life in Russia with a new sense of purpose, saying, “Let me be what I am and not pretend.” Kitty and Levin show how living according to one’s own conscience can result in happiness and not necessarily the tragedy which will confront Anna. However, Tolstoy clearly asserts that living true to oneself in an insincere society leads to great difficulty and possibly deep suffering.

A superficial city society corrupts not only Anna, but also the family life which Tolstoy focuses on as the center of the novel. Especially after his conversion, Tolstoy views the family and traditional domestic life as a place of purity. The family grounds individuals so they may better resist the glitter of frivolous pursuits. During the late 1800s, the traditional authoritarian structure of the family was being challenged by Western ideas. Revolutionary nihilists at the time advocated for the removal of all traditional structures, including the monarchy and the patriarchal family structure. Though after his conversion Tolstoy finds some similarities to the thinking of the nihilists, including a desire to “go back to the people” and find contentment among the peasants, he disagrees with many of the nihilists’ very radical approaches, especially those concerning the family structure.

35 *Mironov*, 176-179.
As evidenced in his writing, Tolstoy believes the exemplary, outstanding individuals of the world – the Annas – though needed occasionally to shake up the conventions, are not those to whom the world belongs. Instead, it belongs to the average people invested in ordinary, family affairs. These average people receive not the spotlight, but like Levin and Kitty in the novel, they survive and flourish in their mediocrity. However, the shining characters such as Anna fall and die, cut by a society which does not understand them. Tolstoy considers himself as a landowner and a father in the grouping of the ordinary. Though ambitious, he shuns the city and events put on in his honor.

The Struggle of Women in Society

Tolstoy explores the changing social structure of the time and criticizes the corrupting high society of city life for destroying the integrity of the institution of the family. Through this novel he hoped to influence readers, particularly concerning what he viewed as the decay of the family. The dual plot strands of Anna and Levin and Kitty are carefully interwoven to reinforce the main themes and to provide contrast between the domestic life of Levin and Kitty and the tumultuous life of Anna and Vronsky. Through these strands Tolstoy comments on his view of the place of women in society. He views women as primarily domestic – it is society which interrupts this reverent domesticity. Kitty serves as a domestic ideal in the story – in contrast to Anna, Kitty has no real interests outside of her house and family.

As illustrated through his diaries and letters, Anna Karenina is written by a sexist man entrenched in the traditional ideas of his time. While Tolstoy maintains traditional
views on the role of women common to his time, throughout the early years of his diaries, such as from 1951 when Tolstoy routinely refers to women as sexual objects, mentioning “chasing wenches” and “pawing at maids.” After leaving college due to a venereal disease, he remarks in 1847 that women are worse than men, saying “Who is to blame for the fact that we lose our innate feelings of boldness, resolution, judiciousness, if not women?” After removing himself from his dissolute life in the city, he forms firm ideas on the ideal domestic life for a woman. As seen in his diaries and letters to his then-future wife, Sofya Behrs in 1862, Tolstoy believes that the highest place a woman could fill is that of a mother, perhaps drawing on the loss of his own mother at age two. To him, a woman is expected to revel in the domestic sphere and her husband, as Kitty does upon her marriage to Levin: “All her life, all her desires and hopes were concentrated on this one man.” When Tolstoy’s marriage enters a troubled period in the late 1870s, he blames his wife. “She got up and I told her everything, told her that she had ceased to be a wife. A helpmate for her husband? A mother to her children? She doesn’t want to be. A nurse? She doesn’t want to be. A companion of my nights? She makes a bait and plaything even out of that,” he writes in his diary in 1884. As evidenced from this diary entry, he believes the role of a wife is to assist her husband, mother her children, and perform other feminine roles.

The extent of his views are illustrated in a letter to the journalist and later close friend, Strakhov, about an article Strakhov had written on the woman question that had disagreed with the liberal views on equal rights for women in the workplace. “I read your article with great pleasure and wholeheartedly subscribe to its conclusions,” Tolstoy

36, 37, 38, 40 Leo Tolstoy, Tolstoy’s Diaries, 35, 68, 12, 222.
39 Leo Tolstoy, Anna Karenina, 453
says, but then makes one disagreement with Strakhov’s concession for women unable to marry and bear children. “There is no necessity for devising a way out for women who can no longer bear children and those who have not found a husband and there always has been and always will be a demand for such women, without offices, university departments, and telegraph offices. There are midwives, nannies, housekeepers, and dissolute women.”

Tolstoy revises these views after his conversion, as he then believes men and women should remain celibate and so considers prostitution a sin.

Tolstoy’s warnings against the corruption of women by society illustrate his traditional views on the woman question and his belief that the place of women is to be domestic, in the home. However, he believes women to be nearly perfect, more so than men, and to be closer to God in that they give birth. Men can only come close to this blessed state through hard labor in the fields. Any departure from this leads to corruption, and Tolstoy criticizes high society in the novel for its superficiality and fakery.

After engaging in a half-hearted courtship of a daughter of a neighboring landowner, Tolstoy writes about his views on family, marriage, and domestic life in the short novella, *Family Happiness*. The title is ironic as the marriage shown within its pages is anything but happy. The characters foreshadow the characters of *Anna Karenina*: an older man wedded to a younger woman full of life. Ultimately, the woman in *Family Happiness* reconciles herself to a lukewarm happiness through love for her children, illustrating both Tolstoy’s views on women and their entrapment in society. This ending contrasts with the ending of *Anna Karenina*, where Anna abandons her son.

cannot love her daughter, and commits suicide after being consumed by jealousy. The difference illustrates the change which took place in Tolstoy’s thinking concerning women. Tolstoy realizes women cannot save the family solely through their own domesticity in the face of an attacking society.

Anna Karenina illustrates the consequences of succumbing to the pressures of society, but it also provides a quaint picture of a nearly happy home life with Kitty and Levin. Kitty cooks, organizes the home, nurses Levin’s dying brother, and gives birth. When Kitty gives birth for the first time, she appears even more perfect to Levin as “the world of women rose so high in his estimation he was unable to encompass it.”42 While Kitty’s domestic life reflects Tolstoy’s misogynistic views and the traditional views on women of the time, Tolstoy is careful to show that a domestic life alone is not a guarantee of happiness. Kitty and Levin’s marriage is not perfect, though they are happy. Levin is unable to confide in her after he finds faith, leaving a gap between them at the end of the novel. While Kitty follows her sister, Dolly’s lead at living a domestic life, Dolly’s marriage is anything but happy. When her husband has an affair with their governess and later continues to have affairs and all but abandons his family, Dolly resolves to focus even more on her family. However, her straying husband does not come back to her, her children misbehave, and she remains frazzled. Tolstoy shows readers the corruption of society even when women are focused on traditional roles, illustrating that a woman must do more than merely fill a stereotype to find happiness in life.

42 Leo Tolstoy, Anna Karenina, 717.
Conclusion

Research on Tolstoy's views on women in Anna Karenina reveals how radically his views change over time and how these views impact the novel. Tolstoy's traditional views on the role of women are portrayed in the novel, but more importantly, so is his belief of how men and women alike have to live by their own consciences and not those of a corrupting, false society. He does not condemn Anna for her adultery and he does not intend her suicide as a condemnation from God. Instead, he views suicide as a heroic act, showing how she is finally able to free herself from the corruption of a hypocritical high society. The judgment of this society results in Anna's death. While Tolstoy withholding judgment on Anna, he feels free to criticize the façade of the society and its influence against remaining honest without pretense. Ultimately, Tolstoy leaves us with the conclusion that we must be true to ourselves and our own consciences, not the consciences of others or of society, despite the potential for suffering.

This conclusion adds to the understanding of both the novel and of Tolstoy. This interpretation of Tolstoy's views of women and of Anna, complete with supporting evidence, adds to the scholarship already existing surrounding this topic. Misunderstandings of the meaning of the novel have been highlighted and a new depth to the themes of entrapment, the corruption of society, and the role of women have been discovered. This thesis adds to the existing interpretations of the novel to complete a well-rounded picture of Tolstoy and his views on women in Anna Karenina.

The new scholarship which I undertook to discover the meaning and reasoning behind Tolstoy's revisions of the character of Anna adds a new understanding to the novel, Anna, and Tolstoy. Through this thesis I discovered the influence Tolstoy's
religious conversion had on his revisions, and how these revisions should impact our reading of the novel. These revisions support my earlier hypothesis that Tolstoy did not intend to condemn Anna, but that he instead intended to criticize the false customs of high society. Through this research, a new understanding of the meaning of the revisions and of the novel has been found.
Bibliography


