"The Other Love Satisfied Me": Passionate and Familial Love in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*

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Abstract: This essay examines relationships in Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1878), with a detailed examination of the differences between familial and passionate love. Through an analysis of the three main families in the story (the Karenins, Oblonksys, and Levins), familial love is proven to be the "correct" form of love. With references to Tolstoy's own life, as well as the major economic and societal developments in Russia during the period, I argue that *Anna Karenina* establishes familial love as the only "correct" form of love and the only one that results in a fulfilling life.

Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1878) deals directly with families and love. The novel is introduced with the famous lines "all happy families resemble one another, but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way" (Tolstoy 1). These lines go on to represent the unique struggles felt by the Levins, Karenins, and Oblonskys as they navigate family life and explore how passion and modernity affect the family unit. The greatest factor in determining happiness in *Anna Karenina* is loving "correctly," which is demonstrated through these three families. Familial love, love experienced within the traditional family structure and centred on the continuation of the family, is the "correct" form of love, while passionate love only results in destruction. Linked with passionate love is the idea of modernization, whereas familial love is linked to nature, spirituality, and childhood. The characters within *Anna Karenina* have their choices reflected in both the settings they live in and their attributes; while Kitty Shcherbatskaya is full of "childlike brightness" and lives in the country, Anna Karenina is at the height of fashion and living

in the city, never able to fully settle down with Alexei Vronsky elsewhere (26). Modernity is linked to the unhappiness felt by Anna and her affair—"she cannot be calm and dignified" while an illegitimate wife and modern woman living apart from her true husband Alexei Karenin—and nature and childlikeness are linked to the "correct" form of love experienced by Kitty and Constantine Levin (168). Through this essay, I will show how there is ultimately only one form of "correct" love in *Anna Karenina*, that being familial love. This essay will also display that familial love itself must be grounded in the natural world and children; if not, the family will cease to be a happy one and join the many unique unhappy families.

The traditional family structure, consisting of a father, mother, and children, is an ideal for Tolstoy, which ultimately stems from his own upbringing. Tolstoy's own parents both died when he was a young child, and he craved the familial upbringing he had known so briefly (Simmons 4). Traces of his lived experiences can be found throughout the novel: news accounts of Anna Stepanova Pirogova's suicide by train, mirroring Anna's own death at the end of the novel, undoubtedly link the two together (Tula Provincial News 1872). Stepanova's suicide quickly followed the end of her affair with Tolstoy's friend, Aleksandr Nikolaevich Bibikov (Blaisdell). Further embodying Tolstoy's own experiences is Levin: as Levin gives to Kitty, Tolstoy gave his wife a diary he had written in his youth, containing a number of sexual acts that would go on to greatly disturb her throughout their marriage. Tolstoy's wife, Sophia, further confirms that many things from *Anna Karenina* are directly linked to their own lives, including how Kitty reflects herself: "The whole of my husband's past is so dreadful that I don't think I will [sic] ever be able to accept it" (S. Tolstoy). *Anna Karenina* is grounded in Tolstoy's lived experiences and what he deems to be "correct" and "incorrect." Levin stands in for Tolstoy as a moralistic family man with Kitty by his side, while Anna Stepanova Pirogova and Anna Karenina are forever linked by their adulterous relationships and suicides.

The survival of the family is necessary for characters in the novel to find fulfillment in life—and whether the family is happy one does not matter as much as the fact that it is still a family. While Stiva Oblonsky repeatedly cheats on his wife Dolly throughout the novel, he manages to reconcile his familial relations with her. They may not necessarily be a happy family, but they still remain one. Stiva's cheating, however, is not his main offence against the family: it is the fact that his affair leads Anna to Moscow and to meet Count Vronsky. As well-known literary critic George Steiner writes, "the Oblonsky episode is more than a prelude in which the principal motifs are stated with consummate artistry; it is the wheel which sets multitudinous wheels of the narrative in effortless motion" (802). Essentially, the restoration of one unhappy family is what creates another. Stiva's infidelity sets the stage for the adultery that occurs in the rest of the book; within the first three sentences, readers are made aware of his affair. However, Stiva is presented as a likeable character, and Anna as an irritating and oftentimes vicious one, making Stiva's affair "appropriate." Stiva's infidelity is tolerable because it serves as a cure for his boredom and nothing more; he is "married and [loves his] wife, but had been fascinated by another woman," which prompted his cheating (Tolstoy 37). Stiva's lust for passionate encounters, rather than simply being able to enjoy his family and his home, never goes beyond the scope of lust, allowing for him to maintain his family (albeit poorly). Stiva ends the novel as a "Member of the Committee of a Commission of something or other," a position seemingly made up to ensure that he can take care of his family (732). Stiva's affair is permissible because he remains strongly bound to his family—something that Anna does not do.

The Karenins are yet another family facing discontentment. While readers are not given an in-depth look into what their family life is like prior to Anna meeting Count Vronsky, both Karenin and Anna seem discontent with one another upon Anna's return to St. Petersburg. When they meet at the train station, Anna is unhappy with Karenin's

"gristly ears" (95), and while Karenin is seemingly happy to see Anna and greets her with kind words, his tone reveals him to be "[ridiculing] those who would use such words in earnest" (95). The varying shades of dissatisfaction shown within the families early on introduce readers to the notion of unhappy families being unique. Unlike Stiva, Anna does not go on to have a harmless extramarital affair but gives in to the forbidden and falls in love with Vronsky, breaking up her family and resulting in total unhappiness and dissatisfaction. As Anna mimics Stiva's behaviour, Karenin and Dolly follow suit and parallel each other in their dedication to their work, Dolly's being raising her children and Karenin's being politics. With Anna's affair far surpassing the likes of Stiva's, she will fall from society and be set upon the path to her eventual death.

The Levins are ultimately the only family that have true happiness in *Anna Karenina*. While Levin grapples with his faith throughout the novel, he ends up happy and with the beginnings of a family. Kitty, too, learns the joys of motherhood and seems perfectly fit to start her own family. The success of their family is dependent on Levin's feelings for Kitty, which seem to go beyond love and are almost spiritual. When discussing these feelings with Stiva, Levin tells him "this is not love … It is not [a] feeling but some external power that has seized [him]" (35). Levin's love for Kitty goes beyond an ordinary lustful relationship, which is why his becomes the happiest family. Levin pushes aside passionate love before he starts a relationship with Kitty; he "could not imagine the love of a woman without marriage, and even pictured to himself a family first and then the woman who would give him the family" (87). Levin's idealization of the family, and his greater desire for a family than for a wife, allows him to fill his own life with familial love and happiness. Their family also proves a happy one due to their link with childlikeness; when Levin thinks of Kitty, he quickly thinks of her "childlike brightness and kindness" (26). This, in turn, reminds him of his own childhood: "her smile … carried him into a fairyland [that] softened and filled [him] with tenderness—as he remembered feeling on

rare occasions in his early childhood" (26). The association of Kitty with childlikeness ultimately shows her goodness and compatibility for family-man Levin. Childlikeness in *Anna Karenina* is associated with natural goodness, and this is reflected in those who adhere to "correct" familial standards of love.

In contrast, Vronsky and Anna are shown forcing unnatural youthfulness and beauty upon themselves. Vronsky is "prematurely [balding]" and "[draws] his cap over the bald patch" to hide it (164), while Anna is always conscious of looking alluring for Vronsky, believing "she could hold him only by means of her love and attractiveness" (603). Claudia Moscovici writes in her essay "The Unifying Role of Tolstoy's Conception of Childhood" that "children assume a privileged role in Tolstoy's works … because the author believes that they offer the clearest vision of our spiritual continuity" (504). Children are a representation of the natural goodness of the world, and Tolstoy reflects childlikeness in characters that also harken back to this natural state; children's "personalities harmoniously combine socialised influences and natural tendencies, such that they provide a sharp contrast to the artificial behaviour of most of the aristocratic adults around them" (Moscovici 504). Children lack the falsity that makes up many of the adulterous characters—Stiva's seemingly made-up job, Vronsky's attempt to hide his balding—and have a link to nature and innocence, as is easily seen in Kitty. Children represent something natural in a world that is becoming more artificial and modern, which places an even greater importance these characters and their childlikeness.

The association of family and social structure with modernity allows for a clear reading of the rapidly occurring modernization of Russia within *Anna Karenina* to be associated with the loss of the traditional structure of a family. While familial and "good" characters like Levin are associated with farming and the natural world, adulterous characters like Anna and Stiva are associated with the railway and modernity. Anne Hruska details Tolstoy's use of serfdom as

a representation of the family and discusses how modernization affects both the peasantry and family: "*Anna Karenina* is the novel in which Tolstoy examines most explicitly the relationship between social change and family structure" (637). Anna's first and last scenes in the novel are both at the train station; as a symbol of modernity, the railroad represents both a changing Russia and annihilation of the family unit. Characters often seen visiting the train station—Vronsky, Anna, and Stiva—are all characters who openly participate in passionate and romantic love, with two of the characters openly rebuking their families in the process. The characters who are not often seen at the railway—Dolly, Levin, and Kitty—all end up being characters who recognize the "correct" way of living, which is to honour one's family and to live a natural life in the country. Therefore, the modernization of Russia, being associated with the downfall of families, is inextricably linked to the "incorrect" passionate love and adultery that Tolstoy condemns in *Anna Karenina*.

While there are many scenes that predict Anna's downfall, nothing fully seals her fate until she abandons her children and betrays the duties of motherhood. While Anna has a bond with her son Serezha, it is ultimately one she gives up for Vronsky: "I live without [Serezha] and exchanged his love for another's and did not complain of the change as long as the other love satisfied me" (Tolstoy 691). This "other love" discussed by Anna is passionate love, and it is what directly tears her away from her motherly duties and her son. Anna's affair with Vronsky removes her from her most vital duty, which is what condemns her in this novel. Anna's second child is another demonstration of how this "incorrect" love does not satisfy her, as she feels no real love for her daughter: "at the sight of this child, she realized still more clearly that what she felt for her could not even be called love in comparison with her feeling for Serezha" (489). Anna's lack of love for her daughter draws on the fact that her relationship with the father, Vronsky, is one only of passion and not of any kind of familial attachment. Anna abandons her duties as a mother, both in neglecting her daughter and leaving Serezha behind for passionate love, and has no ties

to family to hold onto when she needs them. Unlike Anna, Dolly is the perfect example of a woman who must rely on familial love; Dolly may not have Stiva's romantic love anymore, but she has her children and therefore keeps her family somewhat intact. Anna's betrayal of her children is the greatest crime that she can commit, and she becomes an enemy to motherhood. Anna's actions against her children lead to the complete breakdown of her family life with both Karenin and Vronsky, and she is unable to be a mother.

The final condemning factor in Anna's life is her devotion to the "other love." Throughout the novel, readers see predictions of Anna's death several times, which are all linked to her passionate relationship with Vronsky. In "Tolstoy's Physical Descriptions," D. S. Merezhkovsky discusses the similarities between Anna and Vronsky's horse Frou Frou, asking, "did fate not send [Vronsky] a warning in the death of Frou Frou?" (776). The depiction of the animalistic passionate love of Anna and Vronsky allows for an easy comparison of Anna with Frou Frou; like the horse, Anna gives herself up to Vronsky completely, and Vronsky "without knowing it" allows for something terrible to happen (Tolstoy 182). Frou Frou, Vronsky's prized racehorse, is killed during a competition while Vronsky is riding her due to a fatal misjudgment Vronsky makes. Upon Frou Frou's crash, "[Vronsky's] face distorted with passion, pale and with quivering jaw" (182). This scene, so easily linked with Anna herself, reveals Vronsky's carelessness with passion. Furthering the foreshadowing of Anna's death and her comparison to Frou Frou is the depiction of Vronsky and Anna consummating their love for the first time. Not only does this scene describe their love as an act of murder and shame but it shows another picture of Vronsky's passion: "Pale, with trembling lower jaw, he stood over her, entreating her to be calm, himself not knowing why or how" (135). This direct comparison and parallel language, and the death of both Anna and Frou Frou linked to Vronsky, emphasizes how dangerous passionate love ends up being for those involved.

As they have no familial bonds, Anna and Vronsky's romantic love becomes their defining characteristic and

consumes their entire relationship with one another. D. S. Merezhkovsky stresses that Anna "never speaks with [Vronsky] about anything except love" (772). The passion they feel throughout the novel is impulsive and all-consuming; the novel never discusses what they have in common, nor what they talk about during most of their meetings. Their love leaves them with nothing else, and when their passion ceases to satisfy them, Anna can no longer stand to live. Anna's death is so violent and vindictive that Vronsky cannot recover from it and ultimately loses his love for her: "[Vronsky] tried to recall his best moments with her, but they were for ever poisoned … He could think of her only as triumphant, having carried out the threat of inflicting on him totally useless but irrevocable remorse" (707). Passionate love fails them, and as Anna has no love for her daughter, she has no familial tie to Vronsky. This final scene with a grief-stricken Vronsky exemplifies the destruction that passionate love brings upon people and how passionate love affairs are not sustainable.

Anna Karenina is the tragic story of a passionate love affair that ended in death. Anna's actions and death at the end of the novel demonstrate how important familial love is and that it must be the one thing that people accept and follow. Anna may have been dissatisfied with her life before Vronsky, but she had a family, a child, and good standing in society. Her betrayal of familial love, in favour of the artificial and modern passionate love, causes her ruin. Dolly, while no longer holding Stiva's lust, comes out relatively unscathed, with her children and family there to support her, and as Stiva's affair was lacking in emotion, he is also allowed to keep his family. Finally, Levin and Kitty go on to be a shining example of how important familial love is to a happy and prosperous life. The key to living a fulfilling life is to have a family, whether it be happy or not, as passionate love ultimately gives way to ruin.

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