

Behind the Mask & Between the Lines: Gender Performativity in *Anna Karenina*

Leo Tolstoy himself described *Anna Karenina* as a novel about family; and the families he wrote about were created and destroyed by the choices of the mothers. In a novel that bears the name of a tortured wife & mother, Tolstoy presents a question that perhaps he never intended to ask: for the women of 19th century Russia, with so much at stake, what lay behind the mask? The women of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* are in a constant state of performance, fulfilling the expectations and roles of their gender: that of wife, mother, and idealized Russian femininity. Through a study of Russian society and gender theory, this paper will explore gender performativity by providing close analysis of Anna Karenina's leading ladies—Anna, Kitty, Dolly and Lydia—and Tolstoy's perspective on how women should function in Russia.

Both historically and literarily, Russians were unsure of what it meant to be Russian. Peter the Great ensured that particular confusion in the construction of St. Petersburg, a palace built to imitate European style, yet still bear proof of Russia's greatness. Legendary, mythic, and contradictory in nature, it stood as a symbol of Russia's prowess while pointing away from anything particularly Russian. Peter the Great himself believed that "to become a citizen of Petersburg was to leave behind the 'dark' and 'backward' customs of the Russian past in Moscow and to enter, as a European Russian, the modern Western world of progress and enlightenment" (Figes). Peter the Great wanted the national identity to be European. In Tolstoy's text, the aphorism "All happy families resemble one another, each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way" (1) has been read by critics as "symbolic of the nation" (Kuzmic). In the same way that the Oblonskys and Karenins are distinctly unhappy and therefore provide a plot for the novel, the relevancy of the nation depends on its tortured, confused construction. The

foundation of Russian history, which is then echoed in the writing of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, is that of unhappiness and the pursuit of becoming something one is not.

While all of Russia was dealing with a sort of identity crisis, none felt it more than Russian nobility and high society. In *Natasha's Dance*, author Orlando Figes describes the Russian aristocracy as "acting out its life as if upon a stage" (43). The performance that began in the foundations of Petersburg had embedded itself into high society. Manners, etiquette, and action were a "foreign language" (43), and as Figes described this life: "the point was not to become a European, but rather to act as one" (44). This societal dichotomy—that of Russia or Westernization—is clearly laid out by Tolstoy in his characterization of Lydia Ivanovna, an example of a Westernized Russian woman. In Part VII of the novel, Lydia brings a Frenchman to Karenin, to share "words" with him on his decision to divorce Anna. This is significant on two accounts: not only is the language of French representing "the ritualized life of ignorance and falsehood" (Conley), but Lydia is enforcing the manipulative control she has over Karenin's life by rejecting the Russian authenticity that drove Anna away from Karenin in the first place. Lydia, who is in love with Karenin, cannot use marriage or the role of wife to assert control; instead, she's able to use the draw of the French—the dignified, Romantic performance—to pull him far away from Anna.

Marriage, although the highest mark of success for the women of Russia, was defined neither by happiness nor by love. Anna, married to Karenin, is not in love at all; if anything, the love she feels is for their son, Serezha. Any positive emotion that Anna experiences is directed toward their child, and much of her annoyance, resentment, and bitterness is directed at Karenin; when Karenin is introduced in *Anna Karenina*, Anna comments: "'Great heavens! What

has happened to his ears?’ ...An unpleasant feeling weighed on her heart when she felt his fixed and weary gaze” (95). When Anna is reunited with Karenin, her concern is for Serezha. All of her commitment and love is directed towards what their union produced, not their marriage.

Dolly Oblonskya, the wife of Oblonsky, possess little knowledge of love, let alone experiences it within her marriage. For Oblonsky, love exists in what is young and beautiful. Marriage between Oblonsky and Dolly is anything but that— Oblonsky justifies his affair: “He could not feel repentant that he, a handsome amorous man of thirty-four, was not in love with his wife...worn out, already growing elderly, no longer pretty, and in no way remarkable” (3). Dolly, possessing no reasonable realities outside of marriage to Oblonsky, is trapped in a loveless union wherein Oblonsky sees no value in her as her youth and beauty have faded.

Initially, these unhappy outcomes are harshly portrayed with a sense of tragedy, as young Kitty highlights the looming inevitability and importance of marriage. Although Kitty eventually does find herself in a loving relationship, part I of the novel focuses its attention on Kitty’s extreme desire for marriage. When she first meets Anna, she falls in love— “she was in love with her, as young girls often are with married women older than themselves” (65). In contrast with Anna’s position, Kitty’s desire to become her is foreboding. Even Anna’s features give warning to the unhappiness of marriage, and it does little to scare off Kitty: there was “a serious and sometimes even sad expression in her [Anna] eyes which struck Kitty and affected her” (65). Specifically displayed in these examples of marriage and motherhood, ultimately women were placed under enormous expectations of maintaining idealized femininity of wife and mother, balancing the French romanticism with the intrinsic Russian nature.

As it functions in community, gender is a primary factor in how societies define power dynamics and social relationships. In a patriarchal society like Russia, gender informed the scope of one's opportunities and choices. Men worked, fought in wars, were educated, and led the families. Women were in the home, passed from father to husband, and had little education, most of it conducted home by their mothers. Moreover, Russian society was not individualistic; tight, codependent communities were formed in the upper echelons of society, and these societies had expectations and power dynamics embedded in them.

Author Gayle Greene describes Tolstoy's ability to write about these structures as his understand of "humans as social creatures and portrayed them in integral relation to a social system and hierarchy which is thoroughly rendered and is as central a subject of this novel as any" (Greene). This gendered social system is arguably the main character of the novel; all plot events stem from it—even the Anna and Vronsky's initial flirtation. When Anna and Vronsky begin their affair, there is little public evidence of it beyond gossip. However, Vronsky can comfortably exist within societal norms, as a man pursuing a married woman is dignified rather than immoral.

"The role of the disappoint lover of a maiden or of any single woman might be ridiculous; but the role of a man who was pursuing a married woman, and who made it the purpose of his life at all cost to draw her into adultery, was one which had in it something beautiful and dignified and could never be ridiculous" (117).

This double standard is setting Anna up for failure and Vronsky for success no matter the end result. Adultery, a serious social and moral stumble, results in Anna's fall from society, while it launches Vronsky to beautiful, dignified heights. Anna's choices and role in the affair are

predetermined by her gender. As a woman, she is afforded far less opportunity in comparison to Vronsky. While his choice to pursue Anna is refined, the woman is “drawn into adultery,” a sin and social error that she would simultaneously have control to deny to Vronsky, yet if she falls into the temptation, she forfeits all rights to dignity, privacy, and respect.

Gender Roles—the responsibilities and expectations of someone based upon their gender—are constructed in Russian society in such a way that women are consistently undermined and stripped of autonomy. Specifically, Kitty (after she is married to Levin) displays an interesting transformation—bearing the strain of those expectations until trying to transition into her role with ease. When Kitty moves into Levin’s house, for the first time independent of her parents, she is responsible for running the household; Levin observes moments of Kitty’s unsure nature as she steps into these expectations: “Kitty was peculiarly charming when she came, half laughing and half crying, to report...that no one would obey her” (437). Levin, an educated, land-owning man, has never experienced a lack of autonomy that would make leadership challenging. Tolstoy picks up on this difference as he writes of Kitty’s change: “He [Levin] did not realize the feeling of change that she was experiencing after her life at home” (437). There is a chasm that separates the men and women of 19th century Russia, and it is enforced by the gender roles that they occupy, and the power dynamics presented by those roles.

Beyond how society defines gender and gender roles, self-identity is deeply affected by gender expectations. In a study on master narrativity, it was found that when development has followed the expectations of the larger social structures—thus fitting what is called the Master Narrative—marginalized groups still feel “stifled.” Although there is comfort in aligning to the

enforced structures, “this suggests a sense of false agency that can occur when questioning one’s life path is not required” (McLean). In the case of *Anna Karenina*’s female characters, there isn’t notable resistance to the role of women in society; this follows our understanding of narrativity, as the women of the novel are obeying social norms to an extent, and therefore possess some sort of agency.

Both Dolly and Kitty face patriarchal confines, yet do not resist, as their choices feel entirely their own. Anna, truly the only one to challenge her society by publicly leaving Karenin, still never equates her struggle with her gender. Instead, her energy and attention are directed at her status with Vronsky. Her subsequent spiral and ultimate suicide are not founded on a need for control or freedom from oppression, but rather the failure to meet her idealized expectations of love and passion. Anna seems to be well aware that her self-identity does not matter much beyond her social identity. As she becomes further isolated waiting for Karenin to grant her a divorce, she begins reading while Vronsky socializes. This act of reading and redirecting her focus towards herself still speaks to a performance; “the woman who reads is...sexually alluring and off-putting, lost as she is in her own self-abandon...still and preoccupied, she is the perfect pose for a model” (Rabinowitz). Analyzing even Anna’s desire to read as a performance of sexuality and creating desire within Vronsky perpetuates the notion that the functions of gender demanded performance. In order to retain Vronsky’s love and affection, Anna had to either retain her beauty and mysterious sexual appeal or become his wife.

In her book *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler discusses Gender Performativity—the theory that due to gender roles and societal expectations, genders are under a certain level of scrutiny

to perform the behaviors and desires of their gender, even if those behaviors and desires do not align with one's own needs. Even more so, the very fact that gender can be performed is indicative that gender is a "fabrication" (173). With this lens, specifically analyzing the choices of the female characters and the male partners and counterparts, it's clear that the novel is dependent on women bearing the performance of their gender.

This performance, of course, is not as obvious as the overarching performance exemplified by the Russian westernization; rather, gender performance for the characters is subtle, often not even realized or addressed. Butler explores these concepts as the appearance of substance: "the mundane social audience, including actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief" (179). In 19th century Russia, challenging gender roles (or even the understanding of gender itself) was entirely undiscussed; both men and women alike conformed to their expected performance without resistance. However, in reference to the central female characters, Tolstoy surveys a number of functions that women served and subsequently performed in, providing an understanding of deeply embedded gender norms in Russian society.

Anna Karenina, bearing the weight of Tolstoy's critique of female passion and desire, is both an adulteress and a doting mother, a lover and a sexless wife; she is both the performance and the reality. As her choices spur the events of the novel, it becomes clear that gender performativity is not just a theory but a subconscious motivation for the titular character. Tolstoy said the novel was about family, and throughout the course of Anna Karenina, it's clear that Anna is the villain in Tolstoy's story. Although presented as slightly sympathetic, often described as a small bird or quivering animal, Anna ends up losing her mind and losing her life.

Revealing his disdain for sexual immorality and mothers who reject their families, Tolstoy makes an example out of Anna's choices. These choices of Anna's, when analyzed with gender performativity in mind, are less like choices and more like inevitabilities; Anna, with no option for changing her own life, and with no understanding that she even had choice, must reconcile the life she chose with Vronsky and the life she left behind with Karenin. As a lover, she is still a beautiful object; as a wife, she is a practical object. Both demand performance, and unfortunately as Tolstoy portrays her, Anna's final moments are a performance—longing for Vronsky's attention and suffering in response to her suicide.

Faced with a cheating husband and fading beauty, Dolly Oblonskya must wrestle with her desire for acceptance and desire for autonomy, and the wide chasm of social downfall that keeps her from taking the leap towards self-realization. Dolly, educated at home by her mother and married to Oblonsky when she is young, possesses no real knowledge of the world before marriage. Divorcing Oblonsky is not an option upon discovering his affair, but Dolly does experience a sort of reckoning upon her visit to Anna and Vronsky's home. Dolly contemplates her life as a lover rather than a dutiful (unhappy) wife—and ultimately decides that the consequences of such an action are not worth it. While Dolly ends up in a completely different set of circumstances than Anna, she too faces the pressure to perform to the standard expected of her gender. While Oblonsky can cheat on her because she is no longer young and beautiful, she has no similar recourse. Instead, the expectations of wife and mother bear down on her and prevent her from choosing fulfillment and love.

Lydia Ivanovna fulfills both the expectations of wife and mother for the Karenins upon Anna's absence, but she also fulfills the gender stereotypes of female manipulation and

jealousy, anxiously marking her territory and exercising what little control she has over Karenin. Lydia is in love with Karenin as she is with everyone—and the control she exercises of Karenin is a keen example of the resources that women had available to them. She is able to use cultural gender norms and religion to manipulate Karenin's decisions. By essentially becoming his housekeeper upon Anna's departure, she stepped into the only performance that she could convincingly create: a nurturing, religious caretaker who can fix all of Karenin's problems with her familial wisdom. Ultimately she's portrayed as manipulative and unsympathetic, keeping Serezha from Anna for the sake of Karenin's love and attention. Once again, Tolstoy seems to be favoring into the maternal, religious ideal mother that Lydia represents even as a flawed character. She ends up the victor when Anna kills herself, ending the novel with everything she always wanted.

In a novel that emphasizes the horrible results of broken families, Kitty Levina plays the role of delicate daughter, dutiful wife, and serene mother, primarily illustrating that when gender roles align with one's personality and nature, the result is not performance but authenticity. In the novel's initial parts, Kitty longs for marriage and family; eventually when her and Levin come together, it is all she ever dreamed of. Throughout their marriage in the novel, Kitty and Levin face little to no setbacks (especially in comparison with the other women and marriages). Clearly, Kitty's self-identity and social identity have aligned to create an ideal scenario: the performance that's asked of Kitty is one that does not violate what she wants; however, the fact that Tolstoy is a man who idealized his mother (Greene) cannot go unchecked. Tolstoy creates a woman who only wants marriage and motherhood-- and she happens to be perfect at all of it. While on one hand, Kitty seems to find relief in marriage that

her female counterparts do not, she also was conceptualized by a male author who wanted her to be a sacred ideal of Russian motherhood.

Is there any chance that breaking down the gender performance of Tolstoy's female characters reveals his perspective on Russian identity? In the book *The Representation of Women in Fiction*, the authors argue that "women cannot be represented as themselves, since we cannot know their identities. They are simply...represented as objects" (Heilbrun and Higonnet). Tolstoy said himself that the novel was about family. And while the male characters of his novel were allowed to realize the complexity of their part in the family unit, the wives faced with a choice: perform or die. Literally, Kitty serves as a model wife for the entirety of the novel, while Anna begins to reject the forms of married life that she despises, and Tolstoy kills her. Perhaps, as literature functions as art, Tolstoy meant nothing for these female characters beyond objectification for the point of plot. While readers can attempt understand Tolstoy's writing through the lens of Russian society and gender performativity (perspectives he may have never intended), what happened in the lives of these fictional women—and the real life 19th century women they represented—lies between the lines.

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