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Priscilla Meyer

Wesleyan University, pmeyer@wesleyan.edu

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Anna Karenina, Rousseau, and the Gospels

PRISCILLA MEYER

“We only know life in this world and this is because if there is meaning in our life, then it is here in this world.”

Leo Tolstoy, 1880s

“Rousseau and the Gospels have been the two great and beneficent influences of my life.”

Leo Tolstoy, letter to Bernard Bouvier, 1905

The richness and ambiguity of Anna Karenina arises from the conflict between its sympathy with both the adulteress and the family. In his novel Tolstoy at once empathizes with Anna and reaffirms the biblical understanding of adultery as sinful, while including a vision of family that could prevent it. Tolstoy’s antidote to the decadence he found in the French novel of adultery is made up of the ideals of Rousseau and the eternal authority of the Gospels; he needed both to answer the question that increasingly tormented him as he was writing Anna Karenina—the meaning of life, and how to live. Tolstoy sets this conflict into dialogue against the background of a variety of literary, philosophical, and sacred texts; he builds his response by recasting the most minute details of each work in such a way that the novel both forgives Anna and enshrines the holy ideal of the family.

Since Les Liaisons Dangereuses first appeared, adultery has been a particularly French theme. To portray an adulteress Tolstoy, who followed French prose closely throughout his life, drew from Rousseau as well as from French works published during the twenty years preceding his writing Anna Karenina. Tolstoy’s novel of adultery in the European style became a “philosophico-moral” one as he set the relationship among Karenin, Anna, and Vronsky into dialogue with the ideas of a range of French novels.1 Tolstoy’s counterexample to the adulterous triangle, the story of the successful marriage of Kitty and Levin, explicitly contradicts the French models and uses the Gospels to suggest the mysteries of the sacrament of marriage.

This article is drawn from chapter 4 of my forthcoming How the Russians Read the French: Lermontov, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy (University of Wisconsin Press, Fall 2008).

1Boris Eikhenbaum, Lev Tolstoy: Semidesiatye gody (Leningrad, 1960), 125.

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Most of the French novels of adultery embedded in *Anna Karenina* address the problem of the adulteress from the point of view of the betrayed husband. Only Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* conveys the adulteress’s experience predominantly from her point of view, which contributes to making it the most important of the novel’s subtexts. Each work relates to particular aspects of adultery in *Anna Karenina*. Rousseau’s *Emile and Sophie, or Les Solitaires* considers the moral questions faced by the husband when the wife is in all other respects an honorable woman. Dumas’ two works on adultery presuppose a dishonorable wife: his essay *Man-Woman* (*L’Homme-femme*) stimulated Tolstoy’s thinking about the “woman question”; his polemical play *Claude’s Wife* (*La Femme de Claude*) provides scenes of unhappy married life. Zola’s *Thérèse Raquin* and *Madeleine Ferat* contribute a few structural and stylistic elements. And Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, a deeper, more artistic work than these four, considers causes of adultery from the woman’s point of view. In all but Rousseau’s *Emile and Sophie*, the women are unredeemable, egotistical adulteresses and the men their victims. Although Tolstoy’s firm views on woman’s role as wife and mother should have made (and in early drafts did in fact make) him unsympathetic to Anna, he nonetheless set out to write of an adulteress who was “only pitiable and not guilty”; he responds to the French works, and restores Rousseau’s ideals, by creating in *Anna* a complex, sympathetic adulteress with a moral sense, whose values are made explicit through the parallel story of Levin, which Tolstoy intended to serve as the “scaffolding” of his novel.

Tolstoy orders his response to the French novels in a hierarchy: at the bottom are Zola’s novels, which are part of the lowly context of the adultery novel and function only as sources for some dramatic moments. Tolstoy rejects Dumas’ view of the battle of the sexes, which functions as a negative subtext for Kitty’s and Levin’s relationship, as well as for some scenes surrounding Anna’s betrayal of Karenin. The fullest novelistic subtextual relationship is reserved for *Madame Bovary.* Tolstoy’s eldest son, Sergei, explains in his memoirs of his father, “My father was a very selective reader, which is not very common. He remembered everything that he had read, and knew how to get the essence out of a book and what to discard.”

In *Anna Karenina* Tolstoy recalls these texts in fine detail and recasts what for him was their social and moral essence, taking up not only their arguments but also their imagery and motif systems. The present article, however, will examine

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4See *Anna Karenina*, ed. V. Zhdanov and E. Zaidenshnur (Moscow, 1970).


7Liza Knapp has shown that Victor Hugo’s *Dernier jour d’un condamné* is also an important French source for *Anna Karenina*. See Knapp, “‘Tue-la! Tue-le!’: Death Sentences, Words and Inner Monologue in Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* and ‘Three More Deaths,’” *Tolstoi Studies Journal* 9 (1999): 4–7.

Tolstoy’s application of this method only to Rousseau’s *Emile and Sophie* and to the Gospels.

**JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU (1712–78)**

While Dostoevsky loathed Rousseau and frequently parodied his *Confessions*, Tolstoy was devoted to him from his early youth.9 “I have read all of Rousseau, all twenty volumes, including the *Dictionary of Music,*” Tolstoy revealed in a 1901 interview. “I did better than adore him, I made a veritable cult of him: at fifteen, I wore his portrait around my neck like a holy image. I knew pages of his writing by heart. I think that I could have written them myself.”10

Tolstoy listed the *Confessions, Emile, and Julie, or the New Heloise* third on a list of about fifteen books that made a deep impression on him between the ages of fourteen to twenty.11 After his stay in Paris in 1857, Tolstoy even made a pilgrimage to Clarens, “the same village where Rousseau’s Julie lived.”12 And near the end of his life Tolstoy wrote that

Rousseau has been my master since I was fifteen. Rousseau and the Gospels have been the two great and beneficent influences of my life. Quite recently I had occasion to reread some of his works and I felt the same elevation of the spirit and admiration as when I read him in my first youth (1905).13

The ideals of Rousseau and the Gospels enable Levin to overcome the impulse to suicide; their absence from Anna’s life makes hers inevitable. The Gospels supply the religious dimension missing from Rousseau’s consideration of adultery.

**EMILE AND SOPHIE (1762–65)**

Tolstoy never experienced a betrayal by his wife, but he manages to convey Karenin’s pain and contradictory feelings toward Anna’s adultery in compelling detail. Catherine II had banned the sale of the French edition of *Emile* when it first appeared in 1762, so that *Emil and Sofia, or the Well Brought-up Lovers from the Works of Rousseau* was published in Russian only in 1779.14 Tolstoy’s “twenty volumes” would have included *Emile’s* little-known sequel, *Emile et Sophie: Les Solitaires*, which appears to have contributed substantially to Tolstoy’s depiction of Karenin’s struggle with the problems faced by a betrayed husband.15

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12Letter to T. A. Ergol’skaia (May 18, 1857), *PSS* 60:189.
14Barran, *Russia Reads Rousseau*, xx, 42, 152. He cites Lotman’s opinion that Catherine banned *Emile* for its criticism of religion, but believes it was instead Rousseau’s words in the “Notes of a Savoyard Vicar,” “we are on the edge of a revolution,” that decided her action (ibid., 42).
15*Les Solitaires* was normally published in Rousseau’s *Oeuvres Complètes* (see footnote 3 above). Although Rousseau was translated into Russian voluminously from 1762 on, Russian translations of *Emile et Sophie*
Emile was finished in 1760; Rousseau wanted to complete the sequel in 1768 but never did. Emile and Sophie comprises two letters written by Emile to his tutor after he has been married to Sophie and has had two children by her, of whom a son survives. They have moved to Paris from the country to distract Sophie from her grief at the deaths of her parents and daughter.

Approaching the capital, I was struck by a dire impression that I had never yet experienced. ... I was afraid to expose such a pure union to so many dangers. ... I trembled, looking at my sad Sophie, to think that I myself was dragging so many virtues and charms into this gulf of prejudice and vice where innocence and happiness would be lost. (p. 294)

He is of course right. In Paris Sophie, led astray by the capital’s permissive attitude toward infidelity, confesses to Emile that she has “sullied his bed” and is pregnant (p. 302). The remaining three quarters of Rousseau’s fragment is devoted to an analysis of the feelings of the wronged husband, one who, like Karenin, has up to this point loved his virtuous wife. What will society think? How should he behave toward his wife? His son? What feeling can he have for the child of his wife’s lover? These are the same questions Karenin is forced to face once Anna confesses her infidelity during their carriage ride home after the steeplechase. Rousseau examines the moral basis for answering them; Tolstoy addresses Rousseau’s judgments by adding a Christian dimension.

Rousseau takes Emile through a series of responses. Emile’s first reaction is that as a virtuous woman who has fallen, Sophie is worse than a frivolous adulteress. But then he wonders,

by what right have I dared to judge her so severely before having been judged myself, before knowing what I should reproach myself for in her wrongs? ... her inconstancy is the result of my own. ... You abandon her and you want her to remain for you! You scorn her, and you want to be honored still! It is your cooling, your neglect, your indifference, which have plucked you from her heart. (p. 311)

In this admission of his own shortcomings, he differs from Karenin, who never considers Anna’s point of view. Indeed, it is Karenin’s “neglect,” however unwitting, that makes her need Vronsky’s love. Emile, however, blames himself for having dragged Sophie against her will to Paris, “where all that is honest is derided” (312). He realizes that it is her honesty that forces her to make her courageous confession, and decides that “she is guilty without being vile” (compare Tolstoy’s “only pitiable and not guilty”). Emile becomes sympathetic to Sophie: “Despite the horror of my fate, I felt a kind of joy in imagining Sophie worthy of esteem and unhappy” (p. 314). Karenin briefly experiences this joy when he is able to forgive Anna’s adultery at what appears to be her deathbed.

\[^{16}\] Rousseau, Emile et Sophie 3:287–356, 365 n. Future citations from this edition are given in parentheses in the text; the translation is mine.
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Putting aside the intensity of his first emotions, Emile decides to think through his situation “with as much sang-froid as if it were another’s” (p. 316).

Everywhere morals are valued, women’s infidelities dishonor their husbands. ... But does the honor of a man ... depend on his wife? ... Can he be dishonored by the vices of another? Was I not by my principles above public opinion? (p. 317)

Karenin makes it clear to Anna that public opinion of their situation is important to him, and Tolstoy affirms, differently, that it is an inevitable factor in Anna’s fate. But Emile decides this is cowardly reasoning designed to allow him to return to a faithless Sophie. Society is right to impute a wife’s bad conduct to the husband; to leave her unpunished shows indifference to honest morals. His “sang-froid” has led him astray, as Karenin’s has been the origin of his woes in his relations with Anna. Emile struggles with the desire for revenge. He realizes that their son forms an indissoluble knot between them, a natural argument against divorce, but, as with Karenin, the thought that his wife will share her love for their son with the child of her lover provokes new rage in him and he resolves to leave her. From this resolution follows the next, also like Karenin’s, to take their son from her, but Emile comes to understand that this is detrimental to his son. He flees France in order to avoid seeing his family and to forget his shame.

Emile records his deliberations in his first letter to his master, which contain his thinking in isolation from interaction with Sophie and society; Tolstoy presents Karenin’s thoughts, often in the third person, though directly from Karenin’s mind, in nine chapters throughout the book, in which he interacts with Anna, Vronsky, Oblonsky, and others as the consequences of her adultery develop. Emile and Sophie is a philosophical monologue in epistolary form, whereas Anna Karenina is a philosophical novel built on dramatic scenes. Yet Karenin’s thoughts excerpted from their dramatic context read very much like Emile’s attempts to reason with his own painful emotional response to the same events. Both husbands confront the situation of a wife with a lover, a legitimate son and an illegitimate infant; honorable men, they try to apply reason to their emotional reactions in order to behave justly, struggling with their humiliation and jealousy that turns to anger and the desire for revenge. The principal philosophical difference in Tolstoy’s treatment is the inclusion of the religious aspect of the question, the sacrament of marriage that binds the couple in the sight of God.

Tolstoy responds to Emile’s unresolved questions. The premise of Anna Karenina is suggested by Emile’s idea that “the adulteries of the femmes du monde are nothing more than intrigues; but an adulterous Sophie is the most odious of all monsters” (p. 311). Anna is contrasted precisely to the adulteresses of Petersburg’s Liza Merkalova-Betsy Tverskaia variety; what causes her tragedy is that, like Rousseau’s Sophie, she takes marriage seriously and is an honest woman. Tolstoy examines Anna’s motivation for adultery in detail; Rousseau is not interested in Sophie’s motivations beyond Emile’s insight that “her

inconstancy is the result of my own ... neglect” (p. 311). Anna, through no fault of her own, has married a man who inspires no passion, for which he cannot be faulted, any more than he can be said to “neglect” her. This addresses Emile’s question, “Does a cruel husband merit a faithful wife?” (p. 323), recasting it in terms of mutual satisfaction and suggesting that even the wife of a technically faultless husband may have understandable motives to be unfaithful. In both cases, the atmosphere of the capital affects women whose incomplete marriages make them vulnerable, Petersburg society ladies having acquired looser attitudes toward adultery from Paris.

Karenin sees his duty to his wife in different terms from Emile: “As head of the family I am the person whose duty it is to guide her, and who is therefore partly responsible” for her morals.\(^\text{18}\) He formulates the speech he will make to her upon her return from Betsy’s, where she and Vronsky have scandalized the company by their behavior even before they become lovers. Like Emile, Karenin tries to use reason to cope with the emotionally charged situation:

I must make the following clear. First, the importance of public opinion and propriety; second, the religious meaning of marriage; third ... I must refer to the harm that may result to our son; fourth, allude to her own unhappiness. (p. 131)

Although Tolstoy makes fun of the formality of Karenin’s logical treatment (“the form and sequence of the speech he had to make shaped itself in his mind ... as though it were an official report”) and has him crack his knuckles twice, by the end of the novel he shows him to be right in each point. In particular, Tolstoy endorses Karenin’s most powerful statement to Anna in their subsequent interview: “Our lives are bound together not by men but by God. This bond can only be broken by a crime, and that crime brings its punishment” (p. 133).

Emile tries to ignore public opinion:

What did it matter what others think of me, provided that in my own heart I did not cease to be good, just, honest? Is it a crime to be merciful? Is it cowardly to pardon an offense? Have I disdained the prejudices of man for so long to sacrifice my happiness to them? ... She who expiates her error by her regret is more worthy of pity than of hate; one can ... pardon her without shame. (pp. 317–18)

Later he considers this to be sophistry. Emile does not test the above proposition, since he neither talks to Sophie again after her confession nor reenters society. Karenin, though having cited public opinion first in his list of concerns, does indeed go against it when he pardons Anna at what all think is her deathbed. For that moment, Vronsky sees the deceived husband, instead of being ridiculous, as worthy of veneration: “That husband in his lofty elevation turned out to be, not only not cruel, false, or absurd, but kind, simple, and dignified” (p. 378). But Karenin knows that a potent “coarse power” will take his humble peace from him, that this “coarse power [of which Betsy Tverskaia is the personification] would rule his life in the eye of the world” (p. 385): “He felt powerless; he was aware in

\(^{18}\)Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, ed. George Gibian (New York, 1970), 131. Future citations to *Anna Karenina* are from this translation and will be given, where appropriate, in parentheses in the text.
advance that everybody would be against him and that he would not be allowed to do what seemed so natural and good” (p. 387). He is eventually reduced to helpless misery by the contempt he perceives all around him, “left alone, disgraced, ridiculed, not wanted by anyone and despised by all” (p. 459). “He felt he could not divert from himself people’s hatred, because that hatred was caused not by his badness... but by his disgraceful and repulsive misery” (p. 460). Tolstoy answers Emile’s question, “What did it matter what others think of me, provided that in my own heart I did not cease to be good, just, honest?” by showing that while Rousseau and Karenin are right that public opinion is unjust and responds to the wrong thing, the victim of adultery is unavoidably affected by it.

Emile considers that the son forms an indissoluble knot between the parents, and is a natural argument against divorce. Certainly Tolstoy agrees. He shows this to be true from the father’s, the mother’s, the son’s and the lover’s points of view: Karenin cannot relate naturally to his son after Anna’s betrayal; Serezha pines for his mother, falls sick after she pays her birthday visit to him, then struggles to forget her—“He took pains to drive [his dreams and memories of his mother] away” (p. 657)—and responds angrily to Oblonsky’s fatuous question, “Do you remember your mother?” (p. 658); Anna’s loss of Serezha is the most painful and insuperable aspect of her attempt to start a new life with Vronsky—the two loves are distinct and equally essential to her happiness, but cannot be allowed to coexist for long (indicated by Anna’s use of Vronsky’s photograph to push out Serezha’s from her album [p. 490]); Vronsky is unable to marry Anna and so has no legal relationship to his own daughter (p. 58).

Emile initially wants to take his son from his wife, but realizes that “to take his mother from his son is ... to sacrifice the child to revenge himself on the mother; it is an act of passion, never of reason. ... It is certain that the resolution to take my son from his mother had been the effect of my anger” (pp. 332–33). But Emile is also tormented at the thought of his son as part of a new family with his wife’s lover: “I would have preferred to see my son dead than to see Sophie with one from another father. This idea made me more bitter, more alienated from her than everything else that had tormented me thus far” (p. 324). The son is inevitably a reminder of both parents, so that letting Sophie keep hers can also serve Emile’s desire for revenge: “May he remind the faithless one every day of her life of the happiness of which he was the pledge, and of the spouse she has left” (p. 333).

Karenin’s feelings about his son are made of a similar mix: “The feeling of anger with his wife [after Vronsky comes to the house] ... gave him no rest. She had not fulfilled his condition and he was obliged to punish her and carry out his threat: to divorce her and take away his son” (p. 330). Karenin admits to Anna, who says he only wants to hurt her by taking Serezha, “Yes, I have even lost my affection for my son, because he is connected with my repulsion for you. But all the same I shall take him away” (p. 332). Tolstoy accepts Rousseau’s understanding of the injured husband’s natural psychological reactions.

Emile finally rejects the idea of taking his son from Sophie because he understands it would harm his son to take him from his mother. Karenin too tries to separate his feelings from consideration of his son’s well-being:

In case of a divorce, what would become of his son? To leave him with his mother was not possible; the divorced mother would have another, illegitimate
family, in which the position and education of a stepson would in all probability
be a bad one. Should he keep him himself? He knew that would be revengeful
and he did not wish for revenge. (p. 392)

At Anna’s bedside Karenin tells Vronsky, “I confess I was haunted by a desire for ven-
geance,” but now he is granted the joy of forgiving (p. 377). In that state Karenin tells
Oblonsky that he will grant a divorce and even give up his son (p. 393), and only later under
the influence of Lydia Ivanovna and her charlatan psychic does Karenin change his mind
and refuse both. Tolstoy as novelist introduces another character to the drama that Rousseau
outlines only in a philosophical way. Through Lydia Ivanovna, Tolstoy creates a necessary
conjunction between man’s law and God’s. She personifies the pressure of society, and
also appears to represent the spiritual side of the argument, but her particular sentimental,
mystical brand of Christianity cannot override her self-interest. Her faith is not tempered
by the reason that Tolstoy so valued, so that her attachment to Karenin distorts her judg-
ment, and his emotional dependency on her prevents him from seeing that.19

When Anna writes to ask to see Serezha, Lydia Ivanovna exclaims to Karenin, “I am
learning to understand your loftiness and her baseness.” Karenin asks, “But who will throw
the stone?”(p. 471). By referring to the Gospel of John, Karenin suggests that he does not
have the right to judge Anna, to cast a stone at the woman taken in adultery. In this he
concurs with Emile’s self-questioning: “By what right do you punish her, by what author-
ity? Are you her judge?” (p. 323). Tolstoy’s epigraph suggests that only God may judge
the consequences of breaking the vows made to Him. As Karenin says to Anna, these vows
are an even more important bond between husband and wife than their children are.

Tolstoy’s morality was formed under the “beneficent” influence of Rousseau, so that
we expect his reading of Emile and Sophie to follow his master’s precepts. Tolstoy allows
Rousseau to frame the dilemma of how to regard the virtuous adulteress who is “worthy of
esteem and unhappy.” Rousseau does this in a philosophical deliberation by his reasonable
hero; Tolstoy is writing a novel, and creates a more fallible cuckold in Karenin. Karenin’s
indifference to Serezha’s pain becomes part of his portrait as hypocritical Christian, a por-
trait that increases our sympathy for Anna as we understand Karenin’s inadequacy as a
husband. Tolstoy dramatizes the schematic questions Rousseau raises in Emile’s mono-
logue and engages our emotions, often agreeing with Rousseau’s analysis, but also intro-
ducing the idea of the Christian sacrament: a marriage is sanctified by God and it is not for
the wife or the husband to dissolve it. While this appears to be Tolstoy’s response to
Rousseau’s framing of the question of the adulteress in Emile and Sophie, his novel is far
richer in ambiguity than the comparison of the two texts suggests. Additional subtexts add
other considerations to the framing of our judgment of Anna.

THE GOSPELS

After finishing Anna Karenina in 1877, Tolstoy went through a religious crisis that gener-
ated four related works, starting with his Confession (begun in 1879) and Criticism of

19See Dragan Milivojevic, “Tolstoy’s Concept of Reason as Applied to Buddhism,” in his Leo Tolstoy (Boul-
Dogmatic Theology (1880), in which he sets out his understanding of the meaning of the Gospel teachings. This led Tolstoy to embark on a re-translation of the Gospels, for which he studied Greek and Hebrew, working intensely from January 1880 to July 1881. Like many post-Enlightenment thinkers, he wanted to isolate the truth in the Gospels for himself by purging them of miracles and mystery, to formulate what he considered to be Jesus’ authentic teachings. This is what is meant by speaking of Tolstoy’s Gospel as “materialist,” a use of the word distinct from the “materialism” of the Radical Russian writers of the 1860s. This quest produced his monumental Unification and Translation of the Four Gospels. The work could not be published in Russia at the time, where religion was one of the most sensitive categories for the censorship, which had rejected Gogol’s title Dead Souls as blasphemous in 1842. Tolstoy considered the Unification unfinished and probably unfinishable when he finally stopped correcting it, and it appeared in a mistake-riddled two-volume edition printed in Switzerland only in 1892–94. It was finally published in Russia in 1906.

It is agreed that Tolstoy exaggerated the degree of his religious conversion in his Confession. Father Florovsky points out that as early as 1852 Tolstoy was already writing, “I believe in one, incomprehensible and good God, in the immortality of the soul and in the eternal reward for our deeds,” and that on March 4, 1855, he wrote in his diary about establishing a new religion:

A conversation about divinity and faith led me to a great, gigantic thought, to the realization of which I feel capable of dedicating my life. This thought is the creation of a new religion, in accordance with the development of mankind, a religion of Christ, but cleansed of faith and mystery, a practical religion which does not promise future bliss, but which provides bliss on earth.

In 1859 Tolstoy wrote Countess A. A. Tolstaiia his “profession de foi” reporting the results of an initial religious quest:

I found that there is immortality, that there is love and that one has to live for another in order to be happy eternally. These discoveries surprised me by their similarity to the Christian religion, and instead of discovering them for myself, I began to look in the Gospels for them, but found little. I found neither God, nor the Redeemer, nor mysteries; nothing.

In 1860 in a continuation of this line of thought, Tolstoy, in his project to “renovate Christianity,” considered writing a “materialist Gospel,” a “life of Christ the

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20N. N. Gusev, Commentary to Soedinenie i perevod chetyrekh evangeli, in Tolstoi, PSS 24:973.
22Tolstoi, PSS 24:987–89.
23See, for example, Richard Gustafson, who devotes considerable space to the argument in Leo Tolstoy, Resident and Stranger: A Study in Fiction and Theology (Princeton, 1986).
24Tolstoi, PSS 47:37.
25Ibid., 60:293.
materialist." Andrew Wachtel points out that Kitty sees in Levin “precisely the presence of church ethics without church dogma,” and this could be taken further: Tolstoy’s account of Levin’s quest for faith is itself a kind of “materialist Gospel.”

Dragan Kujundzic writes that *Anna Karenina* “thematizes, represents and performs its own relationship to the Biblical texts.” Several critics have identified themes, moments, and phrases in *Anna Karenina* that evoke the Gospels; together the Gospel references describe Levin’s movement toward faith. Referring to the Gospels, we can see that the peaks of Levin’s journey are established in parallel with three pivotal moments in Jesus’ life, his crucifixion, his birth, and the second coming, paralleled by Nikolai’s death, Mitia’s birth, and Levin’s epiphany at Kolok. Tolstoy’s later diary entry of 24 January 1894 suggests why this should be so:

> The straight line is God. The narrow places are the approach to death and birth. In those places God is closer. He is not hidden by anything. But in the middle of life He is obscured by the complexity of life.

Kitty’s and Levin’s story “takes place in a context of Christianity.” Tolstoy depicts Kitty through Levin’s eyes as a Virgin Mary:

> He could imagine her vividly…the splendor of that blond little head, with its expression of childlike goodness and clarity, so freely placed on her stately maidenly shoulders. The childlike expression of her face ... created her special splendor. ... But what always amazed him unexpectedly about her was the expression in her eyes, meek, peaceful and just, and in particular, her smile, which always carried Levin into a magical world where he felt himself moved and softened the way he could remember himself on rare days of his early childhood.

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31Tolstoi, *PSS* 52:110.

32Wachtel, “Death and Resurrection in *Anna Karenina*,” 100–101. He quotes the passage cited here to make this point.

The distinctly nonsexual depiction of Levin’s love for Kitty, consistent with Levin’s falling in love with Kitty when she is still a child, his faithfulness to her even when he has lost all hope that they will marry, and their wedding, which leads him to take confession, suggests that for Levin Kitty is invested with the Virgin Mary’s saving grace. The idea is also consistent with Tolstoy’s later demystification of the miracle of Jesus’ birth in the Unification. Tolstoy rewrites the Gospel so that “of the virgin birth there is left only the germ of what might have become an adultery novel”: 34

There was a girl named Mary. This girl became pregnant by someone unknown. Her affianced husband took pity on her and, hiding her shame, accepted her. From her and the unknown father a boy was born. They called the boy Jesus. 35

Kitty is present in the role of Mary at the series of death-birth-resurrection scenes crucial to Levin’s growing faith. Jessica Frank’s fine analysis, which I will summarize here, shows the textual parallels between the Gospels and three crucial scenes in Anna Karenina. 36

Nikolai is depicted as a fallen Christ figure when on his deathbed. Levin remembers how,

despite the ridicule of his fellow students his brother had lived like a monk while at the University and for a year after, strictly observing all the religious rites, attending service, fasting, avoiding all pleasures and especially women: and then how he suddenly broke loose, became intimate with the vilest people and gave himself to unbridled debauchery. (pp. 77–78)

Jesus is accused of similar sins and responds, “The Son of man has come eating and drinking; and you say, ‘Behold, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’” (Luke 7:34). Mary Magdalene is, according to tradition although she is not explicitly identified in the gospels, one of these sinners; she first appears when Jesus is dining at the home of one of the Pharisees. Seeing her supplicating Jesus, Simon says, “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is that is touching him, for she is a sinner” (Luke 7:39). Similarly, when Levin enters Nikolai’s home, where he is dining and drinking wine, he sees “a young pock-marked woman in a woolen dress without collars or cuffs ... his heart sank painfully at the thought that Nikolai lived among such strange people” (p. 78). Jesus and Nikolai read their companions’ thoughts and defend the prostitutes who show them such devotion. Jesus says:

Do you see this woman? ... I entered your house, you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears, and wiped them with her hair. ... You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved

34 McLean, “Tolstoy and Jesus,” 112. Tolstoy’s view is well founded. There is a discrepancy within the four gospels about the annunciation, which comes to Joseph in Matthew 1:20–23, and to Mary in Luke 1:26–33. See Randel Helms, Gospel Fictions (Buffalo, 1988), 48–51; and Morton Smith, Jesus the Magician (San Francisco, 1978), 24–28. I am grateful to Gary Kern for identifying these sources.
35 Tolstoi, PSS 24:48.
much. ... And he said to her, “Your sins are forgiven. ... Your faith has saved you: go in peace.” (Luke 7:44–48, 50)

Nikolai defends Maria similarly:

And this woman ... is my life’s companion, Maria Nikolaevna; I took her out of a bad house. ... But I love and respect her and beg all those who wish to know me ... to love and respect her. She is just the same to me as a wife. ... So now you know whom you have to deal with, and if you feel you will be degraded—there is the door.

He dismisses Maria to fetch the supper wine as Jesus dismisses Mary Magdalene: “You may go” (p. 80). Jesus accuses Simon of neglecting him as well as of disapproving of Mary; Levin feels he has neglected Nikolai, leaving Maria to take care of him: “Instead of looking him up, I dined out and came here” (p. 77). Jesus actively, and Nikolai inadvertently, teach those around them forgiveness: “For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you” (Matthew 6:14); “Levin felt that his brother Nikolai in his soul, despite the depravity of his life, was no worse than those who despised him. ... ‘I will show him that I love and therefore understand him’” (p. 78).

As E. B. Greenwood says, “this scene dramatizes a crucial formative experience in Levin’s religious quest.”37 Tolstoy surrounds Nikolai’s deathbed scenes with motifs from Christ’s Crucifixion. Maria and Kitty attend Nikolai’s last days as Mary Magdalene and the Virgin Mary do Jesus’. The doctor tells Kitty “he can’t live more than three days” (p. 451) and “another three days of torture” pass (p. 457). Jesus is crucified “in the third hour” (Mark 15:25) and predicts that “after three days, I will rise again” (Matthew 27:63). Kitty’s nursing of Nikolai evokes imagery surrounding Jesus on the cross:

Instead of the foul smell there was the odor of vinegar and of scent, which Kitty—pouting her lips and puffing out her rosy cheeks—was blowing through a little glass tube ... on the table medicine bottles and a bottle of water were neatly placed, also a pile of folded linen which would be required later. ... On another table there was a glass of some refreshing drink and some powders. (p. 448)

Jesus is given vinegar to drink while on the cross (Matthew 27:48) and Joseph of Arimathea wraps Jesus’ body “in a clean linen shroud” when he is taken from the cross (Matthew 27:59). The powder echoes the spices the women bring to the tomb to anoint Jesus.38 Levin’s brother is a fallen Christ, a warning to Levin of what he might become by choosing reason over faith (“step by step modern scientific explanations of the phenomena of the universe had driven out [Nikolai’s] faith” [454]). Kitty’s compassionate alleviation of Nikolai’s suffering echoes that of the bystander at the crucifixion who succors Jesus when he cries out, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:47). His motives in giving Jesus the poor man’s wine (vinegar) are ambiguous—either he takes pity

38See Mark 16:1; and Luke 24:1. I am grateful to the Rev. John C. Hall for pointing out this connection to me.
on Jesus’ suffering or he wants to revive him in order to have him suffer a little longer. Kitty succors Nikolai spiritually by having him receive Communion and Extreme Unction; her care for his body that alleviates his ordeal is also ambiguous, in that it allows him to cling to life a little longer despite the hopelessness of his condition. The saving grace of her maternal role as Mary is underscored by the connection between Nikolai’s death and the news of the advent of Levin’s son. Tolstoy reverses the sequence of birth to death in a direction that relieves Levin’s despair in the face of death with the hope and joy of a literal new birth that later takes on the significance of a spiritual one. When the child is born after Kitty’s long labor, “on [Kitty’s] face was the same change from the earthly to that which was beyond earth, as is seen on the faces of the dead; but in their case it is a farewell, in hers it was a welcome” (p. 649). Levin feels he would not have been surprised if he had been told that “they had angel children, and that God was present with them. ... Whence and why had he come? Who was he?” this “human being who had so incomprehensibly appeared from some unknown realm” (p. 648). Tolstoy replaces the unbelievable (to him) miracles and mystery of the Gospels with a natural mystery, the birth of a child. This is the direction Tolstoy takes in his later Gospel; in Anna Karenina the natural miracle of Mitia’s birth eventually brings both mother and father closer to a spiritual awareness.

The birth is not an end in itself; it is a means to epiphany. Mitia’s birth initially inspires no real change in Levin, who, “gazing at this tiny pitiful being, vainly searched his soul for some indications of paternal feeling. He felt nothing for it but repulsion” (p. 650). After the birth, Levin still “suffered so much [from not knowing what he was or why he lived in the world] that he was afraid he might commit suicide” (p. 717). Levin “reviewed the whole course of his thoughts during the last two years, beginning with the clear and obvious thought of death at the sight of his beloved brother hopelessly ill” (p. 721). His suffering is finally turned to joy by the peasant Fedor’s words about Platon who “lives for his soul and remembers God” (p. 719). He realizes that Truth, which is goodness, is revealed to him by Christianity (p. 739) and is outside reason, and that the law of goodness is an “indubitable manifestation of the Deity” (p. 738).

He is briefly distracted from this state of joy by everyday pettinesses, until he realizes that Kitty and Mitia are trapped in Kolok wood in the midst of a thunderstorm. “In that short time the center of the cloud had already so moved over the sun that it was dark as during an eclipse” (p. 734). Jesus, foretelling his Second Coming, says “the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken” (Matthew 24:29). As Levin reaches Kolok, “suddenly everything burst into flames, the earth seemed on fire, and just overhead the vault of heaven seemed to crack…and there was a flash of lightning” (735). Jesus foretells that “as the lightning comes from the east and shines to the west, so will be the coming of the Son of man” (Matthew 24:27).

Levin sees “two figures in dark dresses ... bending over something. They were Kitty and the nurse” (p. 735). Barbara Lönnqvist writes that “the scene with the two women bent over the child recalls the well-known religious motif of Anne and Mary with the Christ

child, and it works as a revelation for Levin. She also finds the icon motif of the “Milk-Giving Mother of God” in the subsequent scene of Kitty’s breast-feeding Mitya, in which Levin says “today, after that fright during the storm, I realized how much I love him” (p. 738). It takes the lightning bolt to fuse Levin’s new spiritual understanding with his love for the immediate world around him. In this way Tolstoy unites Levin’s love for his own child with love of Christ. Levin realizes that his “new feeling ... be it faith or not ... is just like my feeling for my son” (p. 740). This is the essence of Tolstoy’s materialist Gospel: the realization of goodness in the everyday, the spirit of Christ in every child.

Tolstoy repeats what can be understood as the import of this vision in a diary entry written over twenty years later:

There is only one unique teaching, that of truth—that universal and eternal teaching so perfectly expressed, for myself no less than others, in the Gospels. This teaching calls man to recognize his sonship to God, and to realize ... both his freedom and his service, since in freeing himself from the influence of the world he enters the service of God and His will. And as soon as a man has understood this teaching, he enters into free communication with God and has nothing more to ask from anyone.

This is what Levin has understood by the end of Anna Karenina.

Tolstoy believed that Jesus was the son of God only in the same sense that we are all God’s children:

The expression “Son of God” is accepted by the church as exclusively the name of Jesus Christ. But according to the Gospels it does not have this exclusive sense; it is equally applied to all people as well. This meaning is clearly expressed in many places in the Gospel.

Man’s purpose in life is to reach understanding (razumenie, which is the word Tolstoy uses to translate “logos” in John 1:1) of the nature of the kingdom of God and how to live in it. Tolstoy interprets Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus in the Gospel of John stressing sonhood: “That spirit in man, originating in the infinite and relating to him as son to father ... is what replaces an imaginary God with this real and unique God. ... To glorify the son of God in man, to rely on him, to live in truth means to live in the kingdom of God.” Tolstoy allows Levin to reach this truth by placing him in relation to God and to his own son as part of a continuum of divine and earthly fathers and sons. This is the good news that the Gospel (vozveshchenie blaga liudiam) contains, and the definition of that goodness (blago) is the most essential part of the Gospels for Tolstoy.

40Lønnqvist, “Anna Karenina,” 93.
41This is the resolution of Levin’s discussion of electricity with Vronsky in the Shcherbatskys’ drawing room. Levin criticizes the Spiritualists for wanting to put a spiritual force to a material test (Tolstoy, Anna Karenina, 49).
42Entry from November 1899, quoted in Greenwood, “Tolstoy and Religion,” 155.
43Tolstoy’s “Vvedenie” (“Introduction”) to Soedinenie i perevod chetyrekh evangelii, in his PSS 24:21.
44Tolstoi, PSS 24:170–73.
Other elements associated with the Gospels contribute to the definition of the good offered in the novel. Galina Galagan identifies the ripening of grain as a motif in Tolstoy’s treatment of the stages of spiritual evolution in man in the *Unification*, mentioning as illustration Jesus’ parable of the sower:

Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!

Jesus interprets his parable for the disciples:

Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty. (Matthew 13:1–9, 18–23)

Tolstoy’s translation of the parable of the sower in the *Unification* speaks to Levin’s growth of understanding throughout *Anna Karenina*, which enables his eventual joyful epiphany:

As the sower knows that there are ruts, stones, burdocks in his field, that much of his grain perishes, he knows nonetheless to sow the whole field, that, notwithstanding the loss, much grain will grow and there will be a harvest—thus the life of understanding is sown in people: there will be loss, but there will also be a harvest. ... The same way the life of understanding is sown in all people: some lose this life, others return it a hundredfold.\(^47\)

After Kitty refuses Levin and he returns from Moscow to rejoice in the pure country life, he is so filled with the joy of manuring his fields in spring that

he was not irritated by the sight of a peasant’s horse and colt treading down the young growth ... nor by the jeering and stupid answer the peasant ... gave him in reply to his question:

“Well, Ipat, is it time to sow?”

“We must plow first, Konstantine Dmitrich,” said Ipat. (p. 142)

\(^{46}\)Galagan, *L. N. Tolstoi*, 131. She identifies the motifs of the sower, the door, doubling and the abyss, and analyzes the door and doubling in *Anna Karenina* (ibid., 131–47).

\(^{47}\)Tolstoi, *PSS* 24:177.
Having understood the Gospel parable, we can see the unconscious wisdom of Levin’s not minding the loss of the trodden-down shoots—“there will be loss, but there will also be a harvest”—as well as the truth of Ipat’s apparently impertinent words. Levin is not ready yet for the revelation of meaning he will receive; first he has to plow his ground so that the seeds can take root. For Levin this entails his confession and wedding, Nikolai’s death, and Mitia’s birth. His revelation finally takes place in the summer following Mitia’s birth, at “the most pressingly busy season of the year,” when it is time “to mow or reap the rye and oats, and cart them, to finish mowing the meadows, to replough the fallow land, to thresh the seed corn and sow the winter rye” (p. 717). Levin has been spending his day in the harvest of the grain when he talks to Fedor, who precipitates Levin’s epiphany with his words about Platon, who “lives for his soul and remembers God.” They are standing “beside the neat yellow freshly-reaped stack of seed-rye on the threshing floor” (p. 719). Despite the seeds that were crushed by the peasant’s horse, there is a rich harvest (precisely of seed-rye), both material and spiritual. Even the infant Mitia participates in a growth of understanding: that evening after the thunderstorm Mitia shows that he “recognizes his own people” (p. 737), which is a source of joy to all around him, to Kitty, Levin, the nurse, and Agafia Mikhailovna.

The Gospels announce the coming of the Son of God. In Anna Karenina the divinity in every man makes each a son of God like Jesus; Levin in his painful search for understanding takes on Jesus’ role as Tolstoy’s bearer of the Good News.

Answering the French novels of adultery with Rousseau and the Gospels, Tolstoy is able to reinfuse idealism into the realist novel, which he felt had become distressingly naturalistic. While the Romantics insisted on the unattainability of a Platonic Ideal in the real world, and materialists denied the existence of God, Tolstoy shows another possibility: the continuous approach toward the ideal and the divine in the everyday: both the Romantic and the holy ideal of the beloved can be united, painfully and gradually, with the actual wife; the “strange, limp, red creature” (p. 650) that is Levin’s son can reveal the divinity in the everyday, and the novel of adultery can be transformed into a profession de foi.