The Judgment of *Anna Karenina*: Feminist Criticism and the Image of the Heroine

The critic also, in his own way, *kills the woman*, while killing, at the same time, the question of the text and the text as question.

Shoshona Felman, “Women and Madness”

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**Problems in Ideological Criticism: Criticizing Tolstoy**

“If I were to try to say in words everything that I intended to express in my novel *Anna Karenina*, I would have to write the same novel I wrote from the beginning.”¹ These much-quoted words of Tolstoy’s elevate the abstruse discourse of verbal art above critical exegesis, as he intended, and challenge any attempt at thematic or moral criticism. The repressive effect this comment has had on critics of Tolstoy’s novels is attested to by as valorous a critic as Lionel Trilling: “There are times when the literary critic can do nothing more than point, and *Anna Karenina* presents him with an occasion when his critical function is reduced to this primitive activity.”² In the past, Tolstoy critics have seemed to founder on the sense that the great novels are “Life, not Art”³ and the belief that Tolstoy is to be placed in a category apart from that of other novelists, who are perceived as
conscious and conscientious craftsmen. The infrequency of critical appreciations of Tolstoy’s formal artistry seems to result from a perpetuation of Philip Rahv’s early characterization: “Tolstoy is the exact opposite of those writers, typical of the modern age, whose works are to be understood only in terms of their creative strategies and design. . . . Tolstoy was the least self-conscious in his use of the literary medium. There are no plots in Tolstoy, but simply the unquestioned and unalterable processes of life itself.”

In part this view must be attributed to a Western critical bias that barbarizes Tolstoy and Dostoevsky as crude Russians (or “Rooshians” [Ezra Pound]), “natural” untutored talents, or “genius in the raw” (Virginia Woolf). Dostoevkan iconography typically depicts the frenetic writer and tortured epileptic gripped by poetic madness and racing to complete his manuscripts against the overhanging threat of publishing deadlines and gambling debts. As for Tolstoy, legend poses him barefoot and clad in a peasant shirt, excoriating the conventionality and preciosity of all works of art treasured by Western bourgeois society; a writer whose own works were cleaved from life with one mighty blow by the Creator. As Vladimir Nabokov mythologized Tolstoy:

Yet there remains
one thing we simply cannot reconstruct,
no matter how we poke, armed with our notepads,
just like reporters at a fire, around
his soul. It’s to a certain secret throbbing—
the essence—that our access is denied.
The mystery is almost superhuman!
I mean the nights on which Tolstoy composed;
I mean the miracle, the hurricane
of images flying across the inky
expanse of sky in that hour of creation,
that hour of Incarnation. . . . For, the people
born on those nights were real.

“When you read Tolstoy,” Isaac Babel wrote, “you feel that the world itself is writing, the world in all its variety.” This mythic view of an Olympian Tolstoy, the conflation of Tolstoy and God, pictured by
Maxim Gorky as "two bears in a den," simultaneously inspires awe and arouses the resentment of many readers at a rhetorical power that entraps them in a moral textual universe demanding a virtuous as well as a virtuoso criticism.

Gary Saul Morson attributes the didactic force of Tolstoyan language to Tolstoy's exploitation of what Mikhail Bakhtin terms "absolute language."6 "Have you noticed Tolstoy's language?" Anton Chekhov wrote. "Enormous periods, sentences piled on top of each other. Those periods create the impression of power!"7 And, for most readers, the "great chords" described by E. M. Forster "begin to sound."8 In addition to being overpowered by Tolstoy's diction, sociologically oriented Soviet critics have also found problematic his engagement with moral issues, especially questions of religious faith or religious thought. This has also proven discomfiting to Western critics. As Richard Gustafson comments, "Much of what is central to Tolstoy seems embarrassing to Western critics. Often it is passed over in silence."9

The very notion of practicing a moral or ethical criticism is daunting since it exposes the critic to the dangers of the politics of interpretation. The critic may be accused of a doctrinaire lack of originality; conversely, he or she may be charged with a relativistic subjectivism, defined by deconstruction as "the problem that develops when a consciousness gets involved in interpreting another consciousness, the basic pattern from which there can be no escape in the social sciences."10 Or can there be, as J. Hillis Miller argues, a moment of pure ethical critical response? Is there "a necessary ethical moment in the act of reading as such, a moment neither cognitive, nor political, nor social, nor interpersonal, but properly and independently ethical"?11 Wayne Booth has recently pleaded for ethical and ideological criticism that treats those aspects of narrative that matter most at the same time that he recognizes the beleaguered status of this type of criticism.12 How is ideological criticism to escape the twin pitfalls of the doctrinaire rejection, even censorship, of any ideologically flawed work or its obverse: the critical blindness that results from our own unconscious affirmation of the ideology implicit in a text?

Equally as problematic for those critics who attempt to engage
Tolstoyan morality as a necessary part of Tolstoyan artistry is the fact that the type of critical procedure that extracts a message or moral from the text is exactly the opposite of what Tolstoy demanded from literary criticism. In his treatise *What Is Art?* Tolstoy stated quite explicitly that the moral, theme, and topic of a work of art do not determine its value, even from the moral point of view. Rather, it is the effect of the work, its infectious capacity to knit together an audience in Christian love, that elevates even the most primitive secular work above an overtly Christian piece of iconography. These ideas were nascent even at the time Tolstoy was writing *Anna Karenina* some twenty years earlier. In the letter to Nikolai Strakhov quoted above, Tolstoy finds fault with the sociocriticism, or political criticism, practiced in his time and, by extension, all ideological or moral criticism: “People are needed for the criticism of art who can show the pointlessness of looking for ideas in a work of art and can steadfastly guide readers through that endless labyrinth of connections (*labirint stseplenii*) which is the essence of art, and towards those laws that serve as the basis of these connections.”13 In this passage, as the Russian formalists were quick to observe, Tolstoy rejects a criticism that would consider its task to be the elucidation and evaluation of a work of art's thematic content or message; instead he essentially calls for the practice of close readings: explications in which the critic would investigate the semiotics of a work of art, its signifying elements and structures and the laws or principles by which they are selected and combined. Furthermore, Tolstoy's invitation or challenge to a close reading is not meant to result either in a new or definitive interpretation or in the retrieval of authorial intention, but rather it is intended to reveal the “essence of art” and its “laws”; that is, he calls for an aesthetic, not an evaluative, telos for literary criticism.

Yet, particularly in the case of the novel, ethical criticism is not fully responsible for ideologizing or politicizing—affirmatively or subversively—an essentially neutral artwork. The novel itself, especially the novel of adultery, is already ideological. The goal in practicing an ethical criticism might therefore be to recognize that the ideological aspect of the work is necessarily part of its overall artistic design.14
Criticizing *Anna Karenina*

Feminist ideological criticism, therefore, seems a particularly appropriate tool for critiquing *Anna Karenina*, a novel that strenuously interrogates the gender implications of marital relations and romantic love. Because of the ambiguous characterizations of most nineteenth-century heroines, feminist criticism has undergone a paradigm shift in the last two decades. Feminist revisions of the canon and rereadings of major works about women resulted in a dead end rejecting all male characterizations of women as fundamentally ambivalent and hence misogynist. More recent feminist criticism poses the problem in a more sophisticated fashion as an issue in intentionality. If an author condemns his transgressing heroine to death, does this imply approval of social conventions and mores, or does the author intend to provoke a sense of outrage and compassion for the victims of barbarous moral and social conventions? As summarized by Higonnet: “Since certain values can be expressed only through their displacement and ultimate sacrifice in the figure of a tragic heroine, the novelist’s critique of society may actually turn into a tacit confirmation of the existing order.”

Some recent feminist critics demand of novelistic heroines that they represent an unambiguous feminist ideal, even if it is only partially realized. Otherwise, according to their view, novelistic heroines remain the creations of a patriarchally structured desire, ambivalence, and anxiety. Twentieth-century readings of *Anna Karenina* follow this attitudinal shift and thus constitute a chronologically staged series of ideologically determined or culturally bound readings, ranging from Anna as victim to Anna as master of her own fate.

Since the novel’s publication, Anna’s transgression has been alternately universalized as “every man’s tragedy” or trivialized as a Bovarian banality by a masculinist critical reading. When Anna’s fall is read as universal, its specificity to the problems of gender is usually denied according to the perception that women’s problems alone are insufficient to warrant the tragic mode unless they can be expanded to refer to both genders. Therefore, the specific problem of confinement
within marriage must be de-gendered and read as the universal state of entrapment. By contrast, “men’s problems,” such as war or statesmanship, do not need to be rewritten in universal terms to include women’s concerns; they are allowed to stand as fully significant in their own right. Iurii Lotman, for example, expresses this view: “The plot of Anna Karenina reflects, on the one hand, a certain narrow object—the life of the heroine. . . . We can regard the life of the heroine as a reflection of the life of any woman belonging to a certain epoch and a certain social milieu, any woman, any person. Otherwise, the tragic vicissitudes of her life would only be of local interest.”17

Conversely, antifeminist readings assume that Anna’s problems are too trivial for us to take her seriously. The power of Anna’s rebellion is diminished even by feminist critics such as Mary Evans, who dismiss her as an inadequate role model for the task of women’s liberation. Thus, in Evans’s view, reading Anna as a victim of the patriarchy and bourgeois institutions only excuses her from being morally responsible. Evans accuses Anna of failing to act to subvert or resist the patriarchy: “Far from resisting conventions, Anna internalizes their constraints. Anna is a poor friend to other women, and she is left in no position to challenge others’ judgements of herself as a fallen woman.”18 The fact that other women in the novel survive under patriarchal oppression, Evans argues, fulfills the reader’s need for a viable alternative to Anna’s ineffectual and self-destructive resistance. Evans concludes: “If there is a message in Anna Karenina, it is perhaps that domestic life and maternity save women from Anna’s hideous fate of morbid jealousy and destructive introspection.”19

Both masculinist and feminist readings, opposed as they are ideologically, impoverish the potential heroism of Anna’s transgression and mute the mythological tones of her quest and fall. Judith Armstrong’s recent feminist rereading of the novel relegates the mythos of Anna’s fall to the unconscious, “unsaid” part of Tolstoy’s novel. Armstrong’s psychoanalytic reading suggests that it is Tolstoy’s unconscious love for Anna and his repressed maternal attachment that invest his heroine with the power and meaning of a mythological hero, but this occurs only in the “unsaid” layers of the text: “The sub-
terranean forces at work in Tolstoy’s novel affect every level of its operation, subverting the norms of rhetoric and discourse as well as those of morality, sexuality, and identity.”20 Thus, Armstrong concludes: “The hierarchy appears to win only if we read Anna’s story as one of retribution against an isolated individual who tried to pit herself against the system; but in reality the triumph of the ‘fallen woman’ is proclaimed in the power she exerts over author, reader, and text.”21

Both feminist and masculinist readings concur in finding Anna guilty and in labeling her a bad, even an evil woman. Her failure according to these interpretations is both proximate and ultimate since she transgresses against the values of a patriarchal society, yet fails to liberate herself and thus remains a compliant prisoner of the patriarchy. In both views, Anna is an evil woman, and the compelling and attractive features of her characterization are accounted for either by assuming that Tolstoy resists any shallow, two-dimensional characterization or that he has failed to master his own psychosexual drives and uncontrolled repressions. In the latter case, we are treated to a Russian reprise of the Flaubertian “Mme. Bovary c’est moi”22 or to the type of Freudian psychoanalysis undertaken by Armstrong to explain how Tolstoy’s early traumatic loss of his mother resulted in the compulsive projection of sexual anima onto a desired female object whose resulting attractiveness and potential for cathexis is so profoundly threatening that even her representation on paper must be destroyed.23

Historically, the criticism has characterized Anna Karenina as a conte moral or novelistic sermon using as a text the novel’s epigraph, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay.” Despite recognition of the novel’s complexity and the ambivalence of Anna’s characterization, the critical consensus is that the novel condemns Anna with heavy-handed didacticism. As Nekrasov observed, “Tolstoy, you’ve proved with patience and with talent, / That a woman should not gallivant / With aide-de-camp or adjutant / When she’s a wife and mother.”24

According to the usual reading of Anna Karenina, the novel reflects Tolstoy’s conservative attitude toward the woman question.25 In commenting on Tolstoy’s extraliterary discussions of sexual moral-
ity, marriage, and adultery, both feminists and nonfeminists automatically place Tolstoy among the archconservatives in the public debate on the woman question, despite the radical feminist implications of his postconversion writings on this subject (see chapter 1). If his postconversion views are discussed, they are only used to turn Tolstoy into the ridiculous, grotesque spectacle of a hypocrite preaching chastity within marriage while continuing to father children with his wife.26

Basing their conclusions on a cursory survey of Tolstoy’s published views on the woman question and the unquestioningly damning evidence of his diaries and married life, critics usually assume that Anna Karenina supports traditional values and social roles based on gender stereotypes, even when they recognize that Tolstoy’s aim is to expose the problematic nature of the institutions of marriage and family life. Even the most recent feminist rereadings of the novel follow this interpretation and thus perpetuate certain prefeminist attitudes.

For example, in some earlier critical accounts, the novel’s heroines are denied consciousness of their own problematic status, and their desire for liberation is discounted as a psychological motivation. “The problem of family happiness and the meaning of life and death,” writes a leading Tolstoy scholar in the 1960s, “is a man’s subject. The Kittys, Annas andNatashas are not troubled by it.”27 What, then, is troubling Anna Karenina? According to René Wellek, she has “no interests” (as if broderie anglaise or visits to invalids would suffice!); she suffers from “boredom with her joint-cracking bureaucrat.”28 Even if the profundity of Anna’s conflict is recognized, her emotional reaction is condemned: “A whole society, perhaps the species itself, is at stake, and here a wretched woman temporizes about it, numbs herself with opium, whimperers over her own precious individuality, and finally jeopardizes everything by suicide.”29 Alternately, Anna is castigated because she fails to assume responsibility for healing her own psychic conflicts and repressions:

Anna’s story is not a tale of social oppression or a drama of failed liberation. Tolstoy, it should be recalled, insisted that people have no rights, only responsibilities. . . . Anna abandons her flawed human
relatedness to which she is responsible. . . . But Anna is not destroyed by others, and self-indulgence is not her fundamental flaw. Anna is not punished by Tolstoy for her sexual fulfillment. In a fuller sense, Anna’s story is a moral tragedy of self-enclosure. 30

Evans offers a related, if oversimplified, criticism: “[Anna] emerges as guilty in the wider sense of a person who was unable to control and discipline her passions and her inclinations.” 31

Anna’s perceived inadequacy to the task of self-development and social reform may be read in a different, less psychological way as continuing the Russian literary tradition of the “superfluous man.” This literary figure, or type, represented by such characters as Eugene Onegin, Pechorin, and the Underground Man, finds his impulse to social rebellion diluted by impotence and the special kind of Russian inertia that has come to be called Oblomovitis. When this problematic profile is embodied in Russian literature in the type of the superfluous man, he earns our censorious sympathy and pitying contempt, but he is rarely labeled evil, even when he murders his best friend or commits rape and other crimes. Rather, he is let off the hook: “By implication, [the superfluous man] points to the inadequacy of a society incapable of assimilating such exceptional types.” 32

Tolstoy’s maneuver of replacing the superfluous man with a superfluous woman whose incapacity is as much a result of her gender as is her vital passion provokes a hostile, judgmental, response from both feminist and nonfeminist critics of the novel. Is this response what Tolstoy intended? Or is it a result of the inner workings of the novel to condemn Anna? Or does the superfluous man draw less fire because his Byronic lassitude, his cavalier destructiveness, and his refusal to commit himself to human relations are implicitly approved of by a society with a masculinist code that considers these attributes the natural expression of male individualism? By contrast, a feminist critic might argue, female rebellion involves disengaging from what are perceived to be a woman’s natural occupations of housekeeping and motherhood; therefore, she is considered to be monstrous and perverse in deviating from the natural parameters of her femininity. This
sexual stereotyping is common to both traditionalist male-dominated criticism and to the more recent feminist criticism. The following views expressed by nineteenth-century readers of the novel still seem to underlie contemporary judgments:

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

Or:

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

The identical ideology may be found in twentieth-century criticism:

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

Even Evans, in her recent avowedly feminist reading of Anna Karenina, relies on the perpetuation of these attitudes in contemporary society when she subscribes to the notion that mothering is natural while fathering must be learned:

After all, the mother, a married woman, who deliberately chooses an adulterous relationship rather than her maternal responsibilities, would still today be labelled as a deviant and “unnatural” woman.
Anna Karenina against Anna Karenina

The case against Anna, the “strategy of the novel” that “is directed against [her]” so that “Anna must be destroyed,”38 is based on readers’ perceptions of the inevitability of her suicide, which is construed as a death sentence, a form of divine or social retribution, prefigured in the novel’s epigraph, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay.” So common is the death of the transgressing heroine in nineteenth-century fiction that it has come to be seen as an obligatory sop thrown to conventional morality that gives the author the latitude to portray his or her heroine sympathetically or, alternately, reveals the author’s discomfort in affirming deviance.39 According to one feminist critic: “Anna, many feminists would remark, ends the novel dead: the inequalities between women and men that constitute a major feature of Western society are vividly portrayed in the novel—bourgeois heterosexuality kills women and ruins men.”40 Another feminist critic draws the same conclusion: “The overall message is to all intents unequivocal; in Anna Karenina Levin makes the right choices and so lives and flourishes beyond the back cover of the book; Anna chooses wrongly, and therefore must die even before the last chapter. Nothing could be clearer.”41

However, most critics have found this aspect of the novel extremely problematic and far from clear. To begin with, Tolstoy’s use of the biblical epigraph, especially in its incomplete form (omitting “saith the Lord”), creates a disconcerting uncertainty in the reader as to who is speaking: does Tolstoy quote God or speak for God or as his surrogate, or is Tolstoy God? Is authority equivalent or superior to divine nemesis? As Boris Eikhenbaum complains: “The point is not, of course, that Tolstoy makes the solution of guilt and criminality subject to the will of God, but that this God [is] now undoubtedly subject to the will of Tolstoy as the author of the novel.”42 According to an alternate critical tradition, Anna’s death is not the result of God’s vengeance on her, but is instead the culmination of the cruel and unforgiving treatment she received at the hands of her fellow man; “Society is the villain of the piece”43 or, as Viktor Shklovsky proclaimed, “Genuine human morality contradicts the Biblical quotation, and it
is not God, but people . . . who pushed Anna under the wheels of the train."

These two readings reflect the distinction that needs to be made between the Old and New Testament judgments on sexual transgression and punishment. In Deut. 32:35, God reserves vengeance to himself and promises that punishment shall ensue without mercy whereas in Rom. 12:19–21, Paul exhorts his listeners to leave vengeance and punishment to God: "My dear friends, do not seek revenge, but leave a place for divine retribution." Since Tolstoy does not cite chapter and verse for his epigraph, it remains unclear whether he was referring to the Old or New Testament version of the edict or whether he intended to set up a tension between the two. Interpretations of the epigraph, therefore, have tended either to assume that it reflects an Old Testament morality and the punitive action of a wrathful God through worldly events or to follow the Christian precept that it is not for humanity to judge, but for God; and not on earth, but in heaven. The latter is the view expressed by Dostoevsky: "There are not, and cannot be any healers or final judges of human problems other than He who says, 'Vengeance is mine; I will repay.' He alone knows the whole enigma of the world and the final destiny of man." What we know about the origination of the epigraph in Tolstoy's novel argues for this latter interpretation. Eikhenbaum demonstrates that Tolstoy originally borrowed the biblical quotation from a passage in Artur Schopenhauer (The World as Will, Book 4, chapter 62) in which the philosopher demands the suspension of human judgment: "No person has the authority to set himself up as a moral judge and avenger, to punish the misdeeds of another with pain which he inflicts on him . . . . This would be, rather, presumption of the highest degree; hence the Biblical 'Vengeance is mine; I will repay.'"

The biblical quotation may also be found in other novels of the period dealing with adultery, specifically in two works Tolstoy was known to have read and admired: Trollope's Phineas Redux (1876) and Mrs. Henry Wood's East Lynne (1861). In Phineas Redux the eponymous hero attempts to soften the wrath of the abandoned husband by quoting this passage from Scripture. Similarly, in East Lynne the aban-
doned husband restrains himself from acting against his rival by quoting the same biblical passage. Within this literary tradition of adulterers and adulteresses spared punishment by the avenging husband, the scriptural passage becomes even more clearly associated with the other biblical text that is frequently repeated throughout Anna Karenina: “Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.”

Tony Tanner suggests that the tension between Old and New Testament rulings on adultery constitutes the driving force of the novel of adultery:

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

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

Rarely, critics like Robert L. Jackson have noticed the coloration of fatalism in the details that overdetermine Anna’s suicide and, like Martin Price, they regard Anna as a tragic heroine, “because for reasons that are admirable [she] cannot live [a] divided life or survive through repression.” “The tragic situation is a situation from which there is no escape,” observes E. B. Greenwood. “[Anna’s] fate has a contingency and yet a pattern that bears the marks, not of the author’s vindictiveness, but of the poetic inevitability we associate with tragedy.” Other critics, perhaps following D. H. Lawrence’s
example, question whether there is the possibility for tragedy in overstepping what Lawrence called the “smaller system of morality”:

Anna, Eustacia [Vye], Tess [Durbeyfield] or Sue [Bridehead]—what was there in their position that was necessarily tragic? Necessarily painful it was, but they were not at war with God, only with Society. Yet they were all cowed by the mere judgement of man upon them, and all the while by their own souls they were right. And the judgement of men killed them, not the judgement of their own souls or the judgement of Eternal God.58

If the novel has the tenor of tragic form, such that “destiny is the plot”59 and “character is revealed as a determined shape, as an embodiment of an already existing fate,”60 it is curious that most critics nonetheless deny Anna the status of a tragic heroine. Is this because they are reluctant to read an apparently ultrarealist novel as a tragedy or because there is something problematic in Anna’s characterization that causes them to resist designating her fall as tragic? Or is it because the Tolstoyan passe-partout has blocked their critical judgment?

The issue of tragic form and the novel is discussed at greater length in chapters 3 and 7 of this study, where I explore the ways in which a realist text’s celebration of the random and the prosaic may be subverted and sublated by its overarching poetic design. The more immediate questions that confront our attempt to evaluate feminist criticism of Anna Karenina make it necessary to defer these concerns in favor of formulating other theories of narrative, those having to do with feminist criticism and the concepts of heroism and heroism.

Who Is a Heroine?

The notion of heroism61 is itself made problematic by gender, to the extent that one feminist critic feels it necessary to elevate Anna to the level of “hero, while leaving it to Kitty, Masha and Natasha to remain mere heroines. In other words, Anna transcends the constraints of her gender.”62 Although this statement is meant “to mount a feminist defense” of the novel, it is itself antifeminist. Anna must cross over gen-
der boundaries and cross-dress as a masculine hero since Armstrong denies the heroic quality of the kinds of deeds that a heroine may be called upon to undertake. Armstrong’s statement implies that masculine heroism is superior to feminine heroinism and denies us a female model for heroenic activity that we would recognize as morally and spiritually equivalent to masculine heroism. Her claims for Anna’s heroism involve her “masculinization,” for she notes that Anna, as a writer, wields the pen, notorious emblem of the male member, and engages in the study of architecture, economics, and physics, traditionally male areas of knowledge. Armstrong further argues that Anna acts like a male hero in the sense developed by Vladimir Propp and defined by Lotman as the transgressor of boundaries. Thus, Armstrong overlooks the path taken by many feminist critics of searching for female-based alternatives to male-defined patterns and paradigms; for example, maternal versus paternal models of “anxieties of influence” or, in this case, a narrative model for female heroinism.

In considering the ways in which a paradigm of heroinism has emerged in modern literature in tandem with heroism, Rachel Brownstein comments: “The paradigmatic hero is an overreacher; the heroine of the domestic novel . . . is overdetermined. The hero moves toward a goal; the heroine tries to be it.” The hero ascends the throne; the heroine marries another’s destiny. The static and passive role of the heroine in a hero-centered text was described in Lotman’s plot typology and was subsequently criticized for being phallogocentric by Teresa de Lauretis. The Soviet semiotician Olga Freidenberg has suggested that the basic mythological motif of heroic descent and ascent is often overtly constituted in literary works as a figure of copulation and reproduction. In all of the above typologies, the feminine principle constitutes the inert, spatial ground for the masculine heroic action.

However, there are heroine-centered models of narrative that are equally antique, classical, and mythological, as for example the myths of Psyche or Persephone, whose activity, transgressions, and fulfillment of heroic deeds resemble those of classical heroes, yet who must be interpreted differently because of their sex. In her chapter, “Women Heroes and Patriarchal Culture,” Lee Edwards argues that
“the woman hero is an image of antithesis. Different from the male—
her sex her sign—she threatens his authority and that of the system
he sustains. . . . The woman hero uncovers fractures in the surface of
reality, contradictions in its structure, gaps in its social ideology.”

Since the return of the hero signals the restoration of social order
and balance, the hero must function as an emblem of authority and
must combat his rebellious and subversive selves in the form of his
shadow or demonic alter ego. A hero cannot represent the most men-
acing threat to patriarchal authority since, taken as an amalgam with
his shadow, he (hero and shadow) already constitutes a figure of equi-
librium. The heroine, however, is already constituted as “other” and
thus represents the anarchic forces that threaten to undo order. This
makes the heroinic acquisition of a shadowed “other” extremely prob-
lematic, as we shall see in chapter 7. Therefore, subversion is “a job
for the woman hero, for in patriarchy, femaleness is the ultimate and
inerradicable sign of marginality.”

What kinds of heroinic behavior can be fulfilled by a novelistic
heroine? Evans argues that Anna cannot be elevated to the status of a
heroine “since we might expect at best some evidence that a heroine
attempts to rise above her fate,” and Anna “offers no model of how
women might resist the strictures of conventional patriarchal author-
ity.” It is difficult not to feel that the kinds of feminist criticism that
require that a heroine be a satisfactory role model have not evolved
much beyond the views of Samuel Richardson, who in his 1759 pre-
face to Clarissa demands that a heroine be an “exemplar to her sex.”
This prerequisite leaves it up to the critics’ own moral code to define
the exemplary: virtuous and compliant subjection to the patriarchy or
militant and potent rebellion. Arguing against a similar judgment
brought on Nora in Ibsen’s A Doll House, Joan Templeton comments:

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

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

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

It may be argued that Anna’s claim to heroinism is denied be-
cause of her gender and the nature of the escape open to her in her at-
ttempt to “rise above her condition.” Even if she is forgiven her sexual
transgression, she is never excused for abandoning her son and ignor-
ing her daughter. But is she judged by the same criteria as a hero who
might act similarly? A hero who abandons his impoverished family in
Ireland to pursue his muse in Europe (Stephen Dedalus), or who
leaves his wife and children to seek higher education (Jude the Ob-
scure), or who even sells his wife and child into bondage with no
higher goal in mind (the Mayor of Casterbridge) will be read as hav-
ing heroically shaken free of the mundane and will not be criticized as
severely as a heroine who acts in the same way. Consider Irving
Howe’s (by now infamous) commentary on the opening of *The Mayor
of Casterbridge*:

To shake loose from one’s wife; to discard that drooping rag of a
woman, with her mute complaints and maddening passivity; to es-
cape not by slinking abandonment but through the public sale of her
body to a stranger, as horses are sold at a fair; and thus to wrest,
through sheer amoral wilfulness, a second chance out of life—it is
with this stroke, so insidiously attractive to male fantasy, that *The
Mayor of Casterbridge* begins.

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

In the continental tradition of the novel of adultery, motherhood is rarely a significant event in the heroine’s life. Recall Mme. Bovary’s indifference to her children once she realizes she cannot afford the pleasure of purchasing a lavish layette. Most continental novels separate the passion of the adulterous woman from the passion of the mother, and perhaps this represents a fissure in social perceptions of women’s potential to fulfill multiple roles. As Tanner comments: “The wife and mother in one set of social circumstances should not, and cannot be, the mistress and lover in another. It is well known how bourgeois society tends to enforce unitary roles on its members. . . . From the point of view of that society, adultery introduces a bad multiplicity within the requisite unities of social roles.”72 Tolstoy’s depiction of an adulterous heroine who is both passionately maternal (at least in the first half of the novel73) and sexual thus represents that threatening combination of maternity and sexuality that the Western Judeo-Christian ethic has sought to fragment. Within this ideology, a good woman is a good mother—that is, endowed with a proper maternal instinct that supersedes and eclipses all other drives. Evans poses the argument, in keeping with recent feminist theory,74 that the experience of maternity automatically generates higher moral values, a “woman’s way of knowing” and a “different voice of a caring morality.”75 This theorizing runs the risk of essentializing and biologizing the experience of maternity to a degree that many critics have seen as being virtually protofascistic. According to this view, taken to its extreme, it is not that a good woman is a mother, but rather that a mother is necessarily a good woman, one who, by mothering, automatically creates a higher moral sphere for her children without sub-
verting or threatening the patriarchal system within which she unavoidably exists.\textsuperscript{76}

According to these criteria, Evans elects Dolly the true heroine of \textit{Anna Karenina}, because she endures her oppression in the patriarchy, because she is maternal to the exclusion of her own interests and needs, and because she holds to a morality that is unconstrained by social mores; for example, she visits Anna in spite of the social stigma attached to such an act. In fact, the reader ought not to place too much emphasis on this visit, since the familial relationship between the two women is sufficient to lift the social taboo against private visits between households. Ultimately, when Anna most needs her, Dolly lets her down; she feels it more important to counsel Kitty about breast-feeding than to respond to Anna's obvious distress.

For different reasons, Morson suggests that "Dolly Oblonskaya is Tolstoy's moral compass"\textsuperscript{77} and appoints her the "hero" of \textit{Anna Karenina}, "if by the hero of a book, we mean the character who best exemplifies its governing values."\textsuperscript{78} For Morson, however, the texture and warp of Dolly's life is as significant as her social and moral status as the embodiment of the Victorian ideal of the Angel in the House. Morson reads \textit{Anna Karenina} as a novel that exalts and exemplifies the prosaic and "prosaics,"\textsuperscript{79} and he finds Dolly's eventless, plotless, and "\textit{excessivement terre-à-terre}" existence to be the most prosaically effaced testament to the quotidian and minute processes of life celebrated by the novel. In this sense, Morson seems to imply that Dolly shares the features of the saintly Praskovia Mikhailovna of \textit{Father Sergius}.

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

Tolstoy’s description of Dolly anticipates his subsequent journalistic accounts of the burdens of pregnancy, childbirth, and child rearing. Although he does homage to the indomitable spirit of woman, Tolstoy does not idealize or romanticize. He exposes the cult of domesticity for what it often becomes in a bad marriage: an oppression of woman and a denial of her selfhood perpetuated by the myth of the glories of maternity and housekeeping. In this sense, Morson’s characterization of Dolly as the embodiment of the prosaic is closer to the truth. But does she represent the values that the novel espouses? If we assume, as Morson does, that the novel attacks the notion of romantic passion, a close examination of Dolly’s own views on love and marriage, the same views that sustain her, makes this assertion problematic.

The positive perception of domestic life in the novel is presented by Lyovin, just as Dolly’s idealization is achieved through Lyovin’s eyes, for whom she represents “that picture of family life his imagination had painted”(282), an ideal of domesticity in which Lyovin is destined to be disillusioned. Fantasizing about his future family life, a vision clearly derived from Victorian literary models,60 Lyovin “actually pictured to himself first the family, and only secondarily the woman who would give him a family”(101). The woman herself and the notion of an intimate relationship are irrelevant, so that any of the three Shcherbatsky sisters would have done for his wife. Thus, Lyovin’s dreams are based not on notions of romantic love but on ideals of domestic life. And since Lyovin is disillusioned in his experience of family happiness, we might expect even greater disillusionment on
Dolly's part. Yet, humiliated and impoverished by Stiva's affairs, she still allows herself to be deluded as to the true nature of their marriage and thus colludes in the bourgeois myth of marriage, as it is recounted by Anna:

"Such men are unfaithful, but their own home and wife are sacred to them. Somehow or other these women are still looked on with contempt by them, and do not touch on their feeling for their family. They draw a sort of line that can't be crossed between them and their families...."

"I saw Stiva when he was in love with you. I remember the time when he came to me and cried, talking of you, and all the poetry and loftiness of his feeling for you, and I know that the longer he has lived with you, the lofter you have been in his eyes.... You have always been a divinity for him, and you are that still, and this has not been an infidelity of the heart...."(76)

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

[Dolly] was deeply moved. The tears stood in her eyes, and she could not have spoken without crying. She was... going back in thought to her own wedding... she glanced at the radiant figure of Stepan Arkadevich, forgot the present, and remembered only her own innocent love. She recalled not only herself, but all the women she was intimate with or with whom she was acquainted. She thought of them on the day of their triumph, when they had stood like Kitty under the wedding crown, with love and hope and dread in their hearts, renouncing the past and stepping forward into the mysterious future. Among the brides that came back to her memory, she thought too of her darling Anna, of whose proposed divorce she had just been hearing. And she had stood just as innocent in orange flowers and bridal veil. And now? "It's terribly strange," she thought. (479)

Dolly's description of the transition from maidenhood to married estate curiously echoes the romanticized narrative—complete with reference to the most romantic of topoi, the Alps—that Anna had spun
to Kitty’s wonder earlier in the novel: “‘Oh! How good it is to be your age!’ pursued Anna. ‘I remember, and I know that blue haze like the mist on the mountains in Switzerland. That mist which covers everything in that blissful time when childhood is just ending, and out of that vast circle, happy and gay, there is a path growing narrower and narrower. . . . Who has not been through it?’”(79). Tolstoy contrasts Dolly’s romantic, if disturbed, reverie at the wedding to the conversation of the peasant women who observe the ceremony from the doorway. Speaking as a united community of women, they speculate as to whether the bride is being married against her will or for money, and they flinch at “how the deacon rumbles, ‘Fear your husband.’” No one asserts that the marriage is for love (perhaps an unconvincing notion). And the concluding comment, “‘What a pretty dear the bride is—like a lamb all decked out [for the slaughter]! Well, say what you will, we women feel sorry for our sister,’”81 expresses a folkloric wisdom in regard to the realities of married life that is starkly different from Dolly’s sentimentalizing.

Dolly’s seemingly heroic endurance is thus exposed as being sustained by the same dangerous bourgeois delusions of romantic love that drive Anna Karenina’s passion. In fact, Dolly represents the “in-authenticity of maternal thinking” of which Evans, quoting Ruddick, accuses Anna. Maternal thinking is “a willingness to remain blind. . . . Maternal thought embodies inauthenticity by taking on the values of the dominant culture. . . . The strain of colluding in one’s own powerlessness, coupled with the frequent and much greater strain of betraying the children one has tended [by raising them to perpetuate the patriarchy] would be insupportable if conscious.”82

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

In a novel whose author unceasingly worries the institutions of marriage and romance, the only genuine feminist heroine might be a woman who rejects the two familiar, fatal choices of marriage or passion to pursue her own autonomous path, who refuses to be the submissive partner in the patriarchal institution of marriage and similarly
resists being construed as the object of male desire. Only one character in the novel meets these criteria, and not only is her choice hard and uncomfortable but she is too minor a character to be the heroine of the novel. Nonetheless, Varenka's choice not to enter into marriage with Koznychev (discussed in chapter 8) and her constant occupation with social service offer a glimpse of an alternate path for a heroine, one that Tolstoy would increasingly valorize in the coming years. Varenka is a heroine of the Florence Nightingale type, the Lady with the Lamp rather than the Angel in the House or the fallen woman out of the house.83

Does viewing Varenka as a heroine imply that genuine feminist heroines must resist marriage? Or genuine Tolstoyan heroines? Are there no happy families in Anna Karenina? Although Lyovin and Kitty's marriage is usually seen as successful, some critics suggest that theirs is a relationship of increasing estrangement, that by the end of the novel "lack of communication has become a way of life for Kitty and her husband."84 The only unadulteratedly happy family in the novel appears to be that of the Sviazhskiis, who are childless. It might be suggested that their childless state implies the kind of Christian, fictitious marriage—an unconsummated connubial relationship like that of brother and sister—that Tolstoy would later advocate.

Ultimately, recent feminist readings of Anna Karenina continue to deny Anna's status as a unique woman: in one case because Anna does not perform as the kind of maternal, sisterly woman the critic's ethical code of feminism demands, she is supplanted by Dolly as the heroine of the novel. In the case of Armstrong's reading, Anna is denied any arena for heroic action because she conceptualizes women's actions as being potent only when they masquerade as men's. Since the critical view that Tolstoy is a misogynist is still well entrenched, a feminist reading of the novel with that perspective must either develop a strategy for reconsidering the traditional values of domesticity within feminist terms (the approach taken by Evans) or it must argue that Tolstoy's unconscious desires granted Anna a force and vitality that survive her textual extinction (the thesis submitted by Armstrong).

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

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

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

By shaking Anna Karenina loose from the standard critical frame that views the novel as a misogynist text exalting the values of domestic life, we are now in a position to reconsider and reinterpret the context and intertext of the novel: the woman question and Victorian fiction. In the next chapter I will examine how Tolstoy’s ambivalent emulation of the Victorians and his polemic with the canon of the nineteenth-century realist novel motivate his assault on aesthetic philosophy. Tolstoy rejects his framework—the established canon of realist literature—as a fundamental failure of representation. His aesthetic vision unfolds both on the margins of his œuvre—in his essays and other writings—and in the creative work itself. In the next chapter, still on the borders of Anna Karenina, we will consider these issues from a theoretical perspective before turning to the artwork itself.