Picking a Mushroom and Escaping the Marriage Plot

[Anna Karenina] is all sour, it reeks of . . . old maids.

Turgenev

The highest type of old maid has made no sacrifice, nor is she in any sense a victim, for marriage as a state is not necessary to her idea of happiness.

Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine (1866)

And thus it was . . . that the learned gentleman came upon the subject of botany, that is to say, upon the subject of mushrooms. These creatures of the shade, luxuriant and anomalous forms of organic life, are fleshy by nature, and closely related to the animal kingdom. Dr. Krokowski went on to speak of a mushroom . . . which in its form was suggestive of love, in its odor of death. For it was a striking fact that the odor of the Impudicus was that of animal decay. . . . Yet even today among the ignorant, the mushroom passed for an aphrodisiac.

Thomas Mann, The Magic Mountain

Labyrinths and Linkages

Discussing the types of linkages Tolstoy felt were so essential to his novelistic artistry in Anna Karenina, Elizabeth Stenbock-Fermor institutes a captivating image that is consistent with her deployment of the architectural metaphor: “Some links are barely noticeable; they
are like the ornaments in medieval cathedrals: plants and animals, related to parables and tradition, constantly reappearing around columns, along arches, or as fill-ins in corners, and all connected structurally and symbolically to the fundamental essence of the building.” It is easy to imagine the edifice budding out in mushrooms, bears, plants with insects, lacy patterns, all of the images that intertwine in Anna Karenina to imbricate the major thematic concerns of
the novel on what can only be considered the subliminal level. Such a profusion of forms, especially when pictured in a visual, architectural sense, belongs to the mode of the grotesque, which Bakhtin defines as the use of images and motifs to establish the reproductivity and cyclicity of the physical plane.²

It may seem anomalous to consider Tolstoy an artist of the grotesque, especially if he is seen as a realist, since Bakhtin considers that realism severs the grotesque from its cyclicity: “The last thing one can say of the real grotesque is that it is static; on the contrary it seeks to grasp in its imagery the very act of becoming and growth, the eternal incomplete unfinished nature of being.”³ In the modern period, what Bakhtin calls “degenerate petty realism” depicts only “the process of degeneration and disintegration[]. The positive pole of grotesque realism . . . drops out and is replaced by moral sententiousness and abstract concepts. What remains is nothing but a corpse . . . alienated and torn away from the whole in which it had been linked to that other, younger link in the chain of growth and development.”⁴
What we consider standard realism thus represents only the decaying side of the grotesque body—in satirical types such as bureaucrats, old crones, and the like.

Characterizing Tolstoy as an artist of the grotesque is not inconsistent with earlier critical evaluations of Tolstoy, most particularly Merezhkovsky’s concept of Tolstoy as a “seer of the flesh.” Tolstoyan depictions of festive occasions and mass spectacles (mummers, hunts, balls, races, elections) may be compared to Brueghel’s paintings of folk celebrations. While Tolstoy’s mass spectacles are as different as can be imagined from the group scenes in Dostoevsky that Bakhtin associates with carnivals, Tolstoy’s arena is no less populous, no less popular, no less festive. And to give just one example, the young Rostovs’ cross-dressing to join the mummers at Christmas reflects the reversal of values and hierarchies associated with carnivals. Tolstoy is also not deaf to the use of the grotesque for satiric purposes, to wit his descriptions of Lidia Ivanovna, the séance sequence, Grinev’s fingernails, and the fly-catching lawyer; Karenin himself, with his large ears and cracking knuckles, occasionally verges on the grotesque. In his use of small ornamental motifs, such as the mushroom and other flora in Varenka’s proposal scene, which is the subject of this chapter, Tolstoy borrows the botanical imagery of folklore and folk poetry. Moreover, in his figuring of the lower strata of the human body, his imagery verges on the grotesque in its brightest, most natural form. Tolstoy’s artistry thus belongs at “the summit of grotesque and folklore realism.”

Despite appreciations of Tolstoy’s use of interconnected images and events, those representing the dominant trend in the criticism resist seeing the symbolic imagination in Tolstoy, arguing that such a view would render his art too allegorical. Thus, John Bayley criticizes Tolstoy’s uses of foreshadowing devices in Anna Karenina as “obtrusive” and schematic, “too symbolically decisive, . . . Tolstoy’s symbolic touch is far from delicate, . . . [and] the linkages by means of metaphor are almost a substitute for the symbolic imagination, as if Tolstoy felt that a novel (“the first I have attempted”) required something of the sort.” Instead, Bayley praises what he perceives to be the random details of verisimilar realism: “These facts seem more meaningful as well as more vital than the metaphoric pattern, the omens,
and the . . . parallels.”8 As an example of these “facts” or “random details,” Bayley mentions “Kitty struggling with a pickled mushroom as she asks Lyovin if there are bears on his estate.”9 Bayley ascribes to this detail an innocence it does not sustain under closer scrutiny.

In the scene in question, where gestures, looks, and ciphers rather than words and actions accomplish Kitty and Lyovin’s betrothal, Kitty states: “You’ve killed a bear, I’ve been told!” (405). Lyovin’s successful bear hunt is onomastically significant: Kitty is “Tiny Bear,” a nickname that in turn is meant to be a pun on Behrs, the maiden name of Tolstoy’s wife. Lyovin has caught his bear/Behrs, just as Kitty now attempts to capture her mushroom—a symbol, as I will try to show in this chapter, of an available male. Furthermore, Kitty’s pursuit of the mushroom on her plate sets “the lace quivering over her white arm” (405) in a seductive, flirtatious action. In an earlier scene, the lace on Anna’s sleeve is caught, as she is caught by Vronsky’s attentions: “Anna Arkadievna, with her quick little hand, was unfastening the lace of her sleeve, caught in the hook of her fur cloak, and with bent head, listening with rapture to the words Vronsky murmured as he escorted her down” (150). She only extricates herself “suddenly, at the very moment she unhooked the lace.” Thus, Lyovin’s successful bear hunt and Kitty’s mushroom chase figure their romantic pursuit of each other in their betrothal scene.

The Courtship Plot

In his scenes of courtship and seduction—even as early as the silent dialogue between a man and a woman in his first prose experiment, “The History of Yesterday”—Tolstoy relies on the semiotics of gesture and sexual attraction, and the discourse of details. The problem of courtship is discussed at the beginning of Anna Karenina within the triangular cultural contrast of English, French, and Russian traditions: “How marriages are to be arranged now the Princess could not find out from anyone. The French way, of parents deciding a daughter’s fate, was not accepted, and was even condemned. The English way, of giving a girl perfect freedom, was also rejected, and would
have been impossible in Russian Society. The Russian way, of employing a professional match-maker, was considered monstrous, and was laughed at by everybody" (41). The problem of how marriages are made and the literary and social conventions of the courtship plot are causally linked in Tolstoy's treatment of the problem of adultery. The debate over the woman question that occupies the guests at the Oblonskys' dinner party proceeds from a recognition of the economic necessity for a woman to marry or to face the limited choices for self-sufficiency as a nurse, companion, governess, or prostitute. The discussion emphasizes the inevitable link between the socioeconomic forces propelling women into loveless marriages and the adultery that frequently results when a woman discovers love after she has been sold in marriage to an incompatible husband. Tolstoy thus reiterates the basic arguments of the woman question as it was formulated in Victorian society as the problem of redundant or superfluous women. Yet when Dolly offers the Victorian answer, that unmarried women can always find a place as an "aunt" caring for relatives' children, Lyovin is convinced of the fallacy of this argument (with which he had initially agreed) as he observes Kitty's reaction:

“No,” said Kitty, blushing, but looking at him all the more boldly with her truthful eyes; “a girl may be in such a situation that she cannot live in the family without humiliation, while she herself....”

At the hint he understood her.

“Oh, yes,” he said, “Yes, yes, yes—you’re right; you’re right!”

And he saw all that Pestsov had been maintaining at dinner about the freedom of woman, simply from getting a glimpse of the terror of an old maid’s existence and its humiliation in Kitty’s heart, and loving her, he felt that terror and humiliation, and at once gave up his arguments. (418)

Tolstoy thus questions the traditional Victorian confinement of women to the domestic sphere in this recognition of woman’s need to find meaningful, independent occupation, and by describing Lyovin’s change of heart, he perhaps intends to effect the same change in his reader. He further explodes the conventions of the English novel of courtship and marriage, replacing Lyovin’s proposal speech with a
game of ciphers. In his literary exploration of what he called “the most important event in a girl’s life,” Tolstoy rejects the premise of Victorian literary and social conventions, which requires marriageable girls to be totally innocent and restrains them from indicating their feelings until they have received a proposal. Such a state of enforced passivity, combined with the false picture of romance presented by literature, disables young women in their sole chance to determine their destiny, as Dolly complains to Lyovin: “To you men, free and able to choose, it’s always clear who you love. But a maiden is in a position of expectation, with that feminine, maidenly modesty, a maiden who sees you, a man, from afar, takes everything at face value. A maiden might often have such feelings that she doesn’t know who she loves or what to say” (285).

**Varenka’s Choice**

Tolstoy counters Victorian victimizing conventions, both literary and social, with a native Russian version of the courtship plot, an “antiproposal” scene: the mushroom-picking episode where Varenka does not receive Koznyshev’s marriage proposal. The isolated scene that involves two minor characters and has no repercussions for subsequent plot actions or other characters is nonetheless embroidered with a delicacy of ornament and detail and an almost baroque overlay of pastoral imagery. In its placement in the novel, the scene is heavily framed and demarcated by the other characters’ discussion of marriage proposals that accompanies the action, much like the commentary of a Greek chorus. The striking setting of this scene as a solitary gem of nonaction in the midst of a rushing plot and Tolstoy’s rich, textured shading and painting of the nonevent focus our attention on this episode as a moment of vital importance; it is not, as other critics have characterized it, a “disposable” scene, or “one of the moments of waste in the novel.”

That Varenka has an important function in the novel connected primarily with the theme of the old maid and the wedding proposal is supported by the consistent application of imagery as her emblematic tag: the leitmotif of the umbrella and the mushroom. The continuous
association of Varenka with umbrellas and mushrooms foreshadows the fatal scene of her nonproposal and thus alerts us to the feminocentric theme of the courtship plot, and to Varenka’s moment of choice and exalted status as a single woman resisting a loveless marriage.

Varenka is metonymically connected with mushrooms from her first appearance, when she opens an umbrella, and later she is described as “the one in the mushroom hat.” In the scene where Kitty and Varenka argue over Varenka’s sincerity in pursuing a life that does not involve love or marriage, Kitty snatches Varenka’s umbrella away from her and breaks it. Finally, in the nonproposal scene, mushrooms not only form the pretext for the outing, but the substance of the conversation; in fact, Tolstoy imitates the use of flowers and plants in oral literature to emblematize the protagonists’ emotions. Thus, mushrooms, like the birch trees and other flora in this passage, constitute a folkloric version of the pathetic fallacy and also provide the protagonists with a folkloric discourse predicated on the collective wisdom of Russian popular literature.

The full significance of Varenka’s mushroom picking and its meaning as a motif and pretext in the proposal scene, especially in the context of mycophilic Russian culture, has never been elaborated. In folklore and mythology the mushroom is a universal image of sexuality, combining both phallic and vaginal characteristics; it is furthermore a sacred food item that is connected with a variety of popular (usually) sexual taboos and a complex folklore of mycology.11 The umbrella, or parasol, is popularly considered to be closely related to the mushroom, as names of mushrooms, riddles, and folklore demonstrate. For example, mushrooms are often named umbrellas—as with the Russian name “speckled umbrella” (zont pyostry)—and there are such riddles as “it has a stem, it has a hat, but it’s not a mushroom” (umbrella) (est i koreshok, est i shliapka, a ne grib [zont]) or “What is a white umbrella standing in the field?” (mushroom).

Mushrooms are privileged motifs in Russian folk culture, both as sacral objects in the mushroom cult and as semiotic objects in a rich folkloric tradition. In his Semiotics of the Mythological Conceptions about Mushrooms, Toporov comments about mushrooms in Russian folklore:
had occasion to observe the atmosphere of mystery and taboo which surrounded the topic of mushrooms even in the villages around Moscow in the pre-war period. In answer to innocent questions about mushrooms one had to endure the rebukes of old women (sometimes even of relatively young women) who viewed this interest in mushrooms as a display of depravity or shamelessness. One would hear again and again such remarks as “you’re still little, when you grow up you’ll find out” or “only girls know this; boys have no reason to.” One also encountered more particular interdictions (for example, there are certain types of mushrooms for pregnant women or for maidens), as well as certain identifications of mushrooms or proscriptions relating to them (at least among juvenile boys), sayings, superstitions, etc. One could not help but have the impression that behind these deeply differentiated taboos, that were relaxed only when one was in the woods or in the company of other boys, there lay something possessing an extremely rich semantics and having a direct relation to the sphere of the “indecent.”

This semantic field is easily organized around the distinctions that are basic to culture as elaborated by Lévi-Strauss in *The Raw and the Cooked*: raw-cooked, inedible-edible, masculine-feminine, adult-child, married-unmarried. Furthermore, in many cultures there is an implicit and explicit isomorphism between culinary proscriptions and rules for marital relations; for example, the French *consommer* applies to both marriage and meals. A Russian reader would automatically recall the idiomatic expression, “you’ll eat a mushroom (*sesh grib*): you’ll have nothing—you’ll be unsuccessful.” In Russian culture, the picking of mushrooms was viewed as a courtship ritual and is described as such in Melnikov-Pechersky. In some cases, the courtship is ritualized in games, such as one game that has been documented in Lithuania, Belorussia, and Russia in which men and women pair off in rows, reciting: “To pick mushrooms / To pick mushrooms / But not boletus . . . / Each finds his own / Takes it by the hand.” Folk sayings refer to the mushroom as a marrying phallus: “What’s for me, an old mushroom, to do with a young wife?” (*Kuda mne, staromu gribu, s molodoi zhenoj vozitsia.*) Against the background of this folklore, for Varenka and Koznychev to pick mush-
rooms is to set the stage for courtship; for them to discuss mushrooms is to invoke that rich semantic field of double entendres and "indecent" subjects that the topic and the setting invite.

When we have read with this aspect of mushrooms in mind, Sergei Ivanovich's proposal to accompany the mushroom picking expedition takes on additional color. His banal comment, "I love looking for mushrooms; I find it a nice occupation (khoroshee zaniatie)," elicits a blush from Varenka. As the expedition sets off, both Varenka and Sergei Ivanovich are given mushroomlike attributes: Tanya puts on Sergei Ivanovich's hat (the wearing of a hat [shliapa] is always used in descriptions or identifications of mushrooms), while Varenka wears a white kerchief and a yellow spotted (stippled) dress. It takes only a little work of the imagination to connect Varenka's appearance (white top, spotted yellow "stem") with the mushroom she and Sergei Ivanovich will later try to describe (its underside looks like the chin of an unshaven man). Similarly, with her white kerchief over her black hair, black and white attire, and her "light, rapid step" (579), Varenka recalls Anna, whose own choice in marriage proved fatal. With choices in love symbolized in the choices in mushroom picking between food and poison, Anna's description of Vronsky's love as food for a starving man takes on added poignancy.

We may recall that in the passage under consideration, Koznyshov fully intends to propose to Varenka. The traditional reading of the episode, which is that both characters lack sufficient passion, is controverted by the botanical imagery. What we know of Sergei Ivanovich's thoughts indicates that he is seriously in love: "The feeling he had for her was something special that he had felt long, long ago, and only once, in his early youth" (588). Whatever love may mean to Sergei Ivanovich, he has now experienced it for the second time. His feeling of "happiness in being near [Varenka] continually grew and grew, and at last reached such a point that . . . he put a huge birch mushroom . . . into her basket" (588). The mushroom is described in unusual detail and initiates the use in this scene of botanical imagery as a folkloric symbology. Sexual attraction and desire are thus revealed, as in a folk song, through the natural imagery that ornaments the action. The mushroom Sergei Ivanovich gives to Varenka is a
birch mushroom on a slender stalk with an upcurling rim. The birch is a folk symbol of maidenhood, and the inverted cap of the mushroom reveals its androgynous structure and the ambivalent concave/convex characteristics that make it a symbol of both masculine and feminine sexuality. Sergei Ivanovich next walks further into the forest, penetrating into the depths of a primeval, secluded natural sphere and thus finding a region or zone where taboos are lifted and where constraints of behavior may be abandoned. The birch trees again suggest the attribute of the young maiden and recall the Russian proverb, “the heart of a young girl is like a dark forest.”

Walking into the heart of the wood, Sergei Ivanovich comes to a standstill by a “bushy spindle tree” (berezkleta) whose etymological root recalls the birch, and he contemplates the erect rosy-red catkins, whose name in Russian, “seryozhki,” may be read as a diminutive of Sergei, Kozynshev’s name, thus evoking the erect phallus as a homunculus or diminutive self. In a series of gestures that may be read as sexual metaphors, Sergei Ivanovich tries to light his cigar but has difficulty getting his match to ignite on the damp trunk of the birch.

That Kozynshev’s attraction to Varenka is genuine is affirmed by the Shcherbatsky women’s discussion of the couple. The gathering of the Shcherbatsky women on the porch in a “woman’s kingdom” (Lyovin’s observation) evokes the women’s world of folk wisdom. Their needlework and their commentary seems purely classical; like the Greek chorus they discuss the significance of the events about to be enacted; like the Fates conspiring to bring Dido her beloved, their cooking of the jam is reminiscent of the witches’ brew. The preparation of jam becomes an onomastic echo of the event: in Russian, the word for jam, “varen’e,” is related to the diminutive Varenka (although no etymological connection is being suggested here—merely a recognition that linguistic play provides emphasis). The issue of when the jam will be ready, of waiting until precisely the right moment, is isomorphic to Varenka’s readiness to receive a proposal and to the importance of the sense of timing, while the description of oozing pink scum in the jam suggests vaginal arousal.

The discussion of Varenka opens with a comment on her dress: “precisely the kind of thing one should give one’s servants,” which
acknowledges Varenka’s dependent status and economic reliance on marriage. Then Dolly affirms Kozynshev’s attraction to Varenka. However, Kitty’s summation of the relationship as she enumerates Varenka’s positive qualities reveals her doubts that Kozynshev’s feelings are reciprocated: “Thirdly, that she should love him. And that is . . . That is, it would be so good!” (581). Varenka’s own thoughts reflect the same ambivalence: “To be the wife of a man like Kozynshev after her position with Mme Stahl, was to her imagination, the height of happiness. Besides, she was almost certain that she was in love with him” (591).

As Kozynshev approaches Varenka with the intention of proposing, she is protecting the mushrooms from the little boy Grisha, who wants to pick them. Instead, Varenka calls to the little girl Masha to pick a mushroom. (The name of the mushroom is syroezhka, another onomatopoeic echo of Sergei/Seryozhka?) This vignette places the power of selection with the female, in spite of social and literary conventions that give the voice and initiative to the male, who is to “proposte.” The mushroom Varenka shows to little Masha is pierced through by a blade of grass: “split in half across its rosy cap by a dry blade of grass.” Masha picks the mushroom and finishes splitting it in half, revealing its feminine interior.

Tolstoy’s treatment of this scene emphasizes imagery and gesture, while denying the primacy of language and proposal texts altogether. Composed entirely according to the rhetoric of novelistic declarations of love, Kozynshev’s prepared speech (“Varvara Andreevna, when I was very young, I set before myself the ideal of the woman I loved that I would be happy to call my wife. I have lived through a long life, and now for the first time I have met what I sought in you. I love you, and offer you my hand” [590]) is never delivered.

The novelistic rhetoric of declarations and proposals is ridiculed quite explicitly in Family Happiness:

“A man may say that he is in love, and a woman can’t,” she said.
“I disagree,” said he . . . “What sort of a revelation is that, that a man is in love? A man seems to think that whenever he says the
word, something will go pop!—that some miracle will be worked, signs and wonders, with all the big guns firing at once! . . ."

"Then how is a woman to know that a man is in love with her, unless he tells her?" asked Katya.

"That I don’t know," he answered; "every man has his own way of telling things. If the feeling exists, it will out somehow. But when I recall novels, I always fancy the crestfallen look of Lieutenant Strelsky or Alfred when he says, ‘I love you Eleanora,’ and expects something wonderful to happen at once, and no change at all takes place in either of them—their eyes, their noses and their whole selves remain exactly as they were.”

The point seems to be that the verbal declaration of love is fallacious—either love has already been declared and an understanding reached or the man is deluding himself.

For example, the “proposal” scene between Lyovin and Kitty takes place with minimal linguistic contact; even the ciphers they sketch in chalk on the table are ignored after they begin to escape “confused, verbose discussion” and instead share a “laconic, clear, almost wordless communication” (417). The nonsemantic aspect of this scene seems even clearer when we note that in the biographical incident on which it is based, Tolstoy’s fiancée, Sonya, was completely unable to decipher the code, but understood Tolstoy’s intentions well enough. Similarly, when Lyovin arrives the next morning at the Shcherbatsky house to formalize his suit, no speeches are made, parental consent is given, and Kitty accepts him, all without the Victorian convention of “asking Father.” Instead, Kitty’s parents immediately embrace Lyovin with the words “So, it is settled.”

Anna and Vronsky’s future is also determined without words or rather without meaningful words, as Kitty observes them with horror at the ball: “They were speaking of common acquaintances, keeping up the most trivial conversation, but to Kitty it seemed that every word they said was determining their fate and hers. And strange it was that they were actually talking of how absurd Ivan Ivanovich was with his French, and how the Eletsky girl might have made a better match, yet these words were important for them, and they felt just as Kitty
did” (87). Or, in *Resurrection*: “They spoke of the injustice of power, of the sufferings of the unfortunate, of the poverty of people, but the reality was that their eyes, gazing at each other as they talked, kept asking, ‘Could you love me?’ and answering, ‘I could.’”

The Shcherbatsky women’s discussion of Varenka’s proposal acknowledges that courtship is a nonverbal phenomenon:

“Mama, how did Papa propose?” Kitty suddenly asked. . . .

“You imagine, I suppose, that you invented something new? It’s always just the same: it was settled by the eyes, by smiles. . . .”

“How nicely you said that, Mama! It’s just by the eyes, by smiles that it’s done,” Dolly assented. (582)

In the realm of nonverbal communication, the gendered restrictions of courtship discourse are diminished, and it becomes possible for the woman to declare her love and thus compromise herself, as Kitty acknowledges to Varenka. She recalls her last dance with Vronsky when the look “full of love she had given him, to which he made no response, cut her to the heart with an agony of shame” (86):

“The humiliation,” said Kitty, “the humiliation one can never forget, can never forget,” she said, remembering her expression at the last ball during the pause in the music.

“Where is the humiliation? Why, you did nothing wrong?”

“Worse than wrong—shameful.” . . .

“Why, what is there shameful?” she said. “You didn’t tell a man who didn’t care for you that you loved him, did you?”

“Of course not; I never said a word, but he knew it. No, no, there are looks, there are ways.” (235)

And there are also ways of telling a man he is not loved and his suit is not welcome. At the moment when Koznyshev is about to deliver his proposal speech, Varenka blocks his intended pass by allowing commonplace language to divert him from his intention:

Varenka saw that he wanted to speak; she guessed of what, and felt faint with joy and panic. They had walked so far away that no one
could hear them now, but still he did not begin to speak. It would have been better for Varenka to be silent. After a silence it would have been easier for them. . . . But against her will, as it were accidentally, Varenka said,

“So, you found nothing?” (591)

Her disruptive words, which are an annoyance to Kozynshev, are also a statement of negation, a rejection of what Kozynshev had indeed found, the genuine desire to propose to her. Taking the hint, Kozynshev “reads” Varenka’s demeanor, which reveals anguished expectation but no desire. The smiles and looks, which are so impossible to counterfeit, are not there. We might recall Princess Maria, whose anxiety in meeting Anatole Kuragin worsened her appearance but who, in front of Nikolai Rostov, is filled with grace and beauty. Taking the cue from Varenka, Kozynshev, “as if it were against his will,” begins to speak about mushrooms, asking a taboo-violating question that elicits an “indecent” reply from Varenka:

“What’s the difference between a white and a birch mushroom?”

“There’s no difference in the cap, it’s in the stalk.”

Kozynshev’s use of folk humor to conclude the exchange also exposes his duplicity, since his subsequent sketch of the mushroom (“a birch mushroom looks like a dark man who hasn’t shaved for two days” [591]) reveals that he knows its appearance quite well.

Both Varenka and Kozynshev act in this sequence “as if it were against their will,” an expression of the involuntary or autonomic behavior that reflects their irrepresible unconscious impulses. The question of freedom of will, which preoccupied Tolstoy throughout his writing of War and Peace and which he rediscovered in Schopenhauer during his writing of Anna Karenina, is explored in Anna in specifically psychological terms as the interaction between conscious intent and unconscious desire. In dissuading Kozynshev, Varenka thus acts according to a natural honesty against what appear to be her own best interests. In fact, she resists entering into a loveless marriage, despite her understandable desire for the status and security of marriage.
Although Kozynshev later concocts a salve for his ego by rationalizing his failure to propose as loyalty to the memory of his childhood sweetheart, the subverbal communication of the nonproposal scene indicates that Varenka rejected his suit.

Varenka’s single state, her conviction that there are “so many more important things” than love and marriage, and her continual attention to others’ needs prefigure the idealized single women of Tolstoy’s post-conversion writings. For example, in Resurrection Maria Pavlovna, who is “wholly absorbed in finding opportunities to serve others,”19 “knew and was even pleased to know that she was beautiful, but far from enjoying the impression she made . . . she was frightened of it and was disgusted and horrified by all love affairs. The men among her comrades who were aware of this, even those who might have been drawn toward her, no longer dared to show their admiration, but treated her as they would have treated a man.”20 The character of Varenka and her escape from the life path of love and marriage point the way to Tolstoy’s ultimate view, that equality between the sexes can only occur when there is an absence of the sexual power relations and possession that are the inevitable accompaniments of the nineteenth-century bourgeois marriage.