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TOLSTOY'S LABORATORY OF MARRIAGE: FROM *FAMILY HAPPINESS* TO *ANNA*
KARENINA

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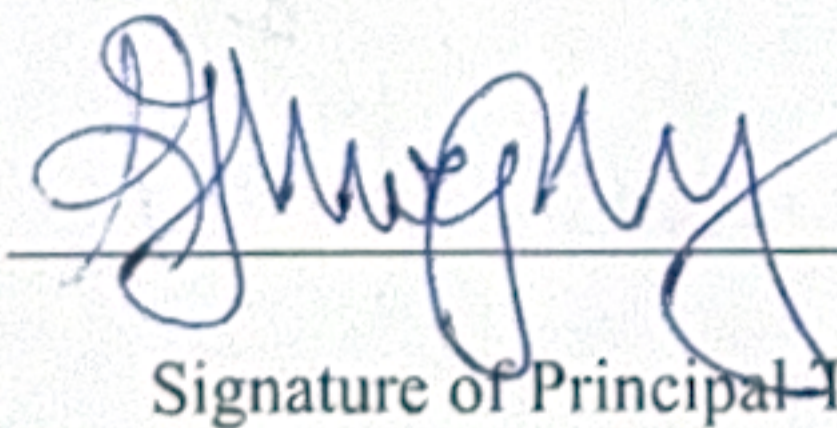
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Abstract

This thesis examines how, in *Family Happiness* and *Anna Karenina*, Leo Tolstoy represents the experience of living within marriage across time. Rather than treating marriage as a stable institution or narrative resolution, Tolstoy portrays it as a condition in which emotional life is reshaped through domestic routine, social life, and continuous interaction between spouses. The thesis argues that marital instability in these texts emerges not simply from external social conditions but from the gradual mismatch between imagined love and the realities of shared domestic life, particularly when romantic idealization is subjected to duration, reflection, and routine. Introducing the concept of Tolstoy's "laboratory of marriage," the thesis defines marriage as a narrative environment in which relationships are tested under changing conditions and shifting perspectives. The thesis traces the development of this experimental method from the single retrospective consciousness of Masha in *Family Happiness* to the comparative and multi-perspectival structure of *Anna Karenina*. In the latter, Tolstoy expands this narrative method through four major marriages, namely those of Stiva and Dolly, Anna and Karenin, Anna and Vronsky, and Levin and Kitty, each revealing a different attempt to reconcile desire, domesticity, and morality. Through shifting focalization and refracted perspectives, marriage is differently imagined, experienced, justified, and judged by multiple consciousnesses occupying conflicting moral and psychological positions. Drawing on narrative theory, feminist criticism, and scholarship on Tolstoyan temporality, the thesis argues that narration itself becomes central to the representation of marital instability. Together, the texts trace the movement from imagined love to lived marriage and from emotional idealization to accommodation, imbalance, endurance, or collapse, revealing how emotional life in Tolstoy's fiction is never immediate or transparent but mediated through memory, interpretation, perspective, and social observation.

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Introduction

Marriage in mid-nineteenth-century Russia presented itself as one of the most stable and socially regulated forms of life, structured by economic necessity, patriarchal authority, and religious sanction. Among the peasantry, marriage ensured labor and the continuity of the household; within the gentry, it consolidated property, social position, and family alliance. Entered early and often arranged, it operated less as a matter of individual choice or emotional fulfillment than as an institutional obligation upheld by legal norms and social practices.¹ The apparent stability that marriage offers as a social institution, however, is often challenged across nineteenth-century Russian literature; in Tolstoy's fiction, specifically, domestic life serves as a site for exploring the struggle between duty, passion, and moral growth.

Unlike the conventional "marriage-plot" of nineteenth-century fiction, where marriage functions as narrative resolution and romantic fulfillment, Tolstoy directs attention toward what happens after the wedding itself. His fiction therefore shifts the focus from courtship to the prolonged experience of living together across time. In this respect, marriage becomes the space where passion confronts routine, where idealized love faces domestic labor, and where emotional life is reshaped by conflict, habit, jealousy, and self-consciousness. Across his works such as *Family Happiness*, *War and Peace*, *Anna Karenina* and later *The Kreutzer Sonata*, Tolstoy contrasts romantic or erotic forms of love within the quieter forms of attachment grounded in family life and everyday work. While relationships based on emotional intensity or erotic passion often lead to instability and destruction, more durable unions emerge through the accommodation demanded by shared domestic existence. By exposing the tensions between family obligation,

¹ Barbara Alpern Engel, "Peasant Morality and Pre-Marital Relations in Late Nineteenth-Century Russia," *Journal of Social History* 23, no. 4 (1990): 696-698.

desire, and spiritual aspiration, Tolstoy's fiction reveals marriage as a contradictory and unstable form of life that continuously tests the moral and psychological capacities of those within it.

The tension between personal desires and the "correct" way of life in marriage structures both *Family Happiness* and *Anna Karenina*. In *Family Happiness*, a love-based union loses its coherence without any external disruption; rather, the very conditions that initially sustain intimacy (e.g., emotional immediacy, romantic idealization, and exclusivity) become difficult to preserve once marriage gives way to routine and social life. The novella therefore shifts attention away from courtship toward the slow transformation of feeling after marriage has begun. This instability is not limited to a single relationship in *Anna Karenina* but distributed across multiple marriages, each of which reveals distinct limits of marital life, whether through passivity, formal rigidity, emotional excess, or, in Levin's case, a moral ideal that must be revised in practice. The pattern that emerges in the narratives is not a contrast between successful and failed marriages; rather, marriage in Tolstoy's fiction serves as the narrative framework within which its ideals are challenged over time, revised, exposed to self-consciousness, and reshaped through interaction with other people and with time itself.

This paper locates the instability of marriage not in external social transformation but within the narrative itself through which Tolstoy represents marital life. In *Family Happiness* and *Anna Karenina*, instability emerges when romantic feeling is forced to survive beyond the moment of romantic culmination and becomes subjected to domestic routine, social visibility, and changing forms of self-awareness. Narrative perspective plays a central role in representing the gradual change and destabilization of emotional life within marriage. In *Family Happiness*, Masha's retrospective first-person narration reinterprets earlier emotional states from the standpoint of later experience, turning feeling into an object of reflection rather than immediate certainty. In

Anna Karenina, by contrast, Tolstoy develops a more sophisticated structure of shifting focalization, allowing different characters to imagine, see, and experience marriage in different ways. Marital instability is therefore generated not only at the level of plot but through narration itself, since feeling in Tolstoy's fiction is continually mediated through memory, interpretation, and perspective.

The existing criticism, however, has explained marital instability by appealing to social and historical change in the institution of marriage in nineteenth-century Russia. Maria Zalambani, in *Institut braka v tvorchestve L. N. Tolstogo: "Semeinoe schastie". "Anna Karenina". "Kreitserova sonata,"* positions *Family Happiness* as a prelude of the arranged marriage's crisis and *Anna Karenina* as depicting its full disintegration, where Anna's public transgression indicates the exhaustion of a social form based in external regulation.² Her sociological paradigm has clarified the historical pressures surrounding Tolstoy's fiction, particularly the nineteenth-century transition from aristocratic "marriage of convenience" toward a bourgeois model centered on personal feeling. Nevertheless, readings grounded primarily in institutional history do not fully account for how marital instability is produced within the internal structure of the narratives themselves. In *Family Happiness*, for example, the marriage deteriorates not simply because social forms are changing but because of the inherent contradiction of the ideal of love-based marriage when it is exposed to duration, retrospection, and the demands of shared domestic life. The marriage crisis is therefore not only historical but built into the nature of a love-based marriage, emerging from the same conditions that initially make it appear fulfilling.

Another line of criticism has approached Tolstoy's departure from the conventional structure of romantic fiction. Hugh McLean argues that *Family Happiness* differs from the

² Maria Zalambani, *Institut braka v tvorchestve L. N. Tolstogo: "Semeinoe schastie". "Anna Karenina". "Kreitserova sonata"* (Moscow: Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Gumanitarnyi Universitet, 2017), 27-28.

sentimental and Turgenevian tradition in which emotional meaning culminates in courtship or unfulfilled longing and instead continues the narratives “beyond the altar into conjugal life.”³ In doing so, Tolstoy shifts narrative attention away from the climactic achievement of love toward the problem of sustaining emotional intimacy after entering marriage. McLean also notes that the second half of the novella transforms the pastoral and romantic framework into what Renato Poggioli terms a “realistic” representation of marriage marked by “frictions, disappointments, and compromises.”⁴ The movement from the secluded emotional harmony of the first part toward domestic strain and altered feeling in the second therefore shows not only a thematic change but also a formal reorientation of narrative interest. Moreover, McLean also emphasizes that Tolstoy distinguishes himself from Turgenevian models of romance by allowing his lovers to marry and by continuing the narrative within the perspective of a married woman, thereby exposing emotional life to change rather than preserving it within the poetic suspension of courtship.⁵

Gary Saul Morson develops his view of Tolstoyan temporality in *Anna Karenina in Our Time: Seeing More Wisely* and “Marriage, Love, and Time in Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*” by highlighting the importance of the “prosaic,” contingency, and everyday duration within the novel form.⁶ Whereas McLean identifies Tolstoy’s structural movement beyond “happy ending,” Morson explains the philosophical and temporal logic governing that movement. In Morson’s account, Tolstoy rejects narrative structures organized around decisive revelations or “turning points,” locating meaning within the accumulation of ordinary experiences and seemingly trivial

³ Hugh McLean, “‘Buried as a Writer and as a Man’: The Puzzle of Family Happiness,” in *In Quest of Tolstoy* (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2008), 19.

⁴ Hugh McLean, “Buried as a Writer and as a Man,” 8.

⁵ Hugh McLean, “Buried as a Writer and as a Man,” 18-19.

⁶ Gary Saul Morson, *Anna Karenina in Our Time: Seeing More Wisely* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 28-29, 31-32. Gary Saul Morson, “Marriage, Love, and Time in Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*,” *Journal of Family Theory & Review* 2, no. 4 (2010): 354

moments.⁷ Read together, McLean and Morson illuminate complementary aspects of Tolstoy's treatment of marriage: McLean identifies the formal movement beyond romantic closure, while Morson clarifies how ordinary temporality itself becomes central to Tolstoy's fiction. Building upon these approaches, this thesis argues that Tolstoy transforms marriage into a structured narrative environment in which emotional life is subjected to duration, domestic routine, and social interaction and consequently reshaped, observed, and, in most instances, undone.

Tolstoy's use of marriage as a narrative method of testing emotional life becomes particularly visible in the comparative organization of marriages within *Anna Karenina*. Existing scholarship has frequently distinguished among the novel's relationships by treating them as separate moral or psychological models, often contrasting Anna and Kitty as embodiments of destructive and constructive forms of femininity, sexuality, and domesticity. While such readings shed light on important differences among the novel's marriages and moral perspective, they often approach these relationships as isolated symbolic, thematic, or moral cases rather than as components of a unified structure.⁸ This paper proposes instead that Tolstoy organizes the marriages in comparative form, building a series of parallel unions in which each marriage challenges the relationship between private emotional life and social form under varying conditions. Also, this thesis suggests that Tolstoy arranges marriages structurally and narratively so that the relationships illuminate one another through shifting focalization. In this regard, *Family Happiness* does not merely precede *Anna Karenina* either in time or ideology; it isolates single marriage as a controlled experimental unit presented through one "female" retrospective consciousness, whereas the subsequent novel expands the method into a comparative and

⁷ Morson, *Anna Karenina in Our Time*, 75-76.

⁸ See Gayle Greene, "Women, Character, and Society in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 2, no. 1 (1977): 110-112; Mary Evans, *Reflecting on Anna Karenina* (Routledge, 2015), 8-10, 16; Bernard Gorin, "Feminine Types in Tolstoy's Works," *The Sewanee Review* 16, no. 4 (1908): 442-445; Amy Mandelker, "The Judgement of *Anna Karenina*: Feminist Criticism and the Image of the Heroine," in *Framing Anna Karenina: Tolstoy, the Woman Question, and the Victorian Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1993), 38-43, 52-55.

multi-perspectival system in which several marriages operate simultaneously, each demonstrating the limits of a particular alignment between feeling, duty, and social expectation.

In addition to these approaches, psychological and feminist criticism have focused on the significance of self-consciousness, inner conflict, and female experience within marriage. Angelika Molnar demonstrates that *Family Happiness*, despite being narrated by a female protagonist, does not fully produce a feminine mode of expression because Masha's voice remains shaped by retrospective control and formal coherence resistant to fragmentation.⁹ This insight is crucial when considered alongside Tolstoy's later development of narrative perspective. In *Family Happiness*, emotional experience remains filtered through a single reflective consciousness, while *Anna Karenina* has more fluid and unstable focalization capable of moving between multiple perspectives while simultaneously preserving critical distance between them. Masha's emotional instability therefore does not arise solely from gendered constraints; it is also produced by the narrative process that exposes her experience to reflection, making it observable and therefore subject to evaluation and transformation.

This thesis consequently shifts the emphasis from what marriages are in *Family Happiness* and *Anna Karenina* to how marriage functions as a narrative process by bringing together institutional, formal, psychological approaches, and gender-oriented approaches. To describe this narrative method, the thesis introduces the concept of Tolstoy's "laboratory of marriage": a controlled fictional environment in which intimacy, desire, moral aspiration, and personal identity are tested under changing conditions across time and space.

Tolstoy's diaries and notebooks show aspects of the experimental logic embedded within his family-oriented novels. From the early 1850s onward, his journals record his sustained attempts

⁹ Angelika, Molnar, "Zhenskoe pis'mo i zhenskaia svoboda: O romane Tolstogo 'Semeinoe schastie,'" *Praktiki i interpretatsii* 6, no. 3 (2021): 116-117.

to observe, classify, regulate, and correct his own emotional and moral condition in language that resembles disciplined self-analysis more than private confession.¹⁰ In this light, Tolstoy's diaries do not simply document his experiences; they transform his thoughts into an object of continuous scrutiny. Tolstoy systematically measures his failures, desires, habits, and moral inconsistencies, dividing the self into observer and being observed. For example, in his early diaries of self-analysis, Tolstoy writes: "As much as I could study myself, it seems to me that three bad passions predominate in me: gambling, lust and vanity,"¹¹ or "I want to get started and get back into the groove of a decent life – reading, writing, discipline and abstinence."¹² These entries show his effort to subject emotional and bodily experience to analysis, regulation, and moral discipline. His diaries likewise hesitate between the pursuit of moral perfection and the recognition of personal moral failure: "I am 24 years old; and I have not done anything yet. I feel that it is not in vain that I have been struggling with doubts and passions for 8 years now. But what am I destined for?"¹³ The self in these diaries therefore never appears unified or stable but continuously evaluated, corrected, and reconstructed through writing itself. Weaknesses Tolstoy examines internally through cycles of reflection and self-correction in the diaries are subsequently externalized in intimate relationships where his characters are challenged under controlled narrative conditions, revealing the tension between moral ideals and the instability of lived emotional experience.

The choice to examine *Family Happiness* and *Anna Karenina* comes from the unique position the two works occupy within Tolstoy's literary career. *Family Happiness* was written before Tolstoy's own marriage, whereas *Anna Karenina* emerged after more than a decade of his

¹⁰ Rosamund Bartlett, *Tolstoy: A Russian Life* (London: Profile Books, 2010), 32-33.

¹¹ Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 46, *Dnevnik 1847-1854 gg* (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo "Khudozhestvennaia literatura," 1937), 93 (March 20, 1852). Translations of Tolstoy's diary entries here and elsewhere are my own, unless otherwise specified.

¹² Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 46: 161 (May 31, 1853).

¹³ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 46: 140 (August 25, 1852).

married life. Yet this thesis does not approach the texts biographically or attempt to trace an evolution in Tolstoy's personal beliefs about marriage. Nor does this thesis aim to explain the differences between the works through changes in his religious or philosophical views. Instead, placing the two texts together allows the thesis to explore how Tolstoy represents the distance between marriage as imagined and marriage as lived. In *Family Happiness*, Tolstoy constructs the movement from imagined love to lived marriage through Masha's retrospective first-person narration, presenting marriage through the perspective of a young female narrator whose romantic expectations confront the transformations brought by time, routine, and social life. In *Anna Karenina*, by contrast, Tolstoy expands focalization into a more complex narrative method, moving between multiple consciousnesses while allowing the narrator's voice to merge with the perceptions and assumptions of individual characters. The novel therefore does not present a single subjective experience of marriage but a comparative structure in which different characters imagine, misunderstand, justify, judge, and endure married life in different ways, with each relationship positioned in relation to the others through parallel development and shifting focalization. Read together, the two works reveal less a linear change in Tolstoy's views than an expansion in his narrative technique for representing the relationship between emotional expectation and the lived reality of marriage.

The thesis consists of two chapters that trace the development of Tolstoy's treatment of marriage from one domestic framework of *Family Happiness* to the large comparative structure of *Anna Karenina*. Across both works, this thesis argues that Tolstoy uses marriage not simply as a theme but as a narrative mechanism through which emotional life is tested under the pressures of time and routine. The thesis therefore develops my concept of Tolstoy's "laboratory of marriage," understood as a structured fictional space in which relationships are exposed to

changing conditions that gradually reshape feeling, intimacy, and self-understanding. Taken together, two chapters demonstrate a development in Tolstoy's artistic treatment of marriage. *Family Happiness* isolates one relationship in order to examine the internal transformation of feeling across time, whereas *Anna Karenina* extends this method into a multi-perspectival structure in which four major characters illuminate one another through contrast and comparison. In both works, Tolstoy moves beyond the sentimental convention that treats marriage as narrative closure and instead represents it as the beginning of an ongoing interaction between spouses within the realities of ordinary life.

The first chapter of this thesis, "*Family Happiness* as the First Model of Marriage," examines Tolstoy's novella as the earliest formulation of this experimental method. The chapter argues that the narrative organizes marriage into a sequence of experimental stages, each of which influences how Masha understands love, happiness, and her marriage. The opening section, "The Romantic Hypothesis," analyzes the secluded and emotionally unified early stage of Masha and Sergey's relationship, arguing that the novella initially constructs the belief that sincere feeling can provide a stable basis for marriage. It analyzes the role of rural seclusion, retrospective narration, and narrative control in producing the appearance of emotional unity. The second section, "Social Visibility and the Destabilization of Marriage," follows Masha and Sergey's movement into St. Petersburg society and demonstrates how visibility, public attention, and admiration in the city exposes Masha to desire, comparison, and judgement from her husband, disrupting the former unity of their marriage. The final section, "Moral Asymmetry and Gendered Experience in Marriage," explores their marriage after their return from St. Petersburg. By focusing on the contrast between Masha's continuing emotional dissatisfaction and Sergey's restrained moral position, the third section shows that their marriage survives through

parenthood and the redistribution of intimacy rather than restoration of it. Together, these sections demonstrate that *Family Happiness* presents marriage not as a stable emotional state but as a temporal process in which feeling is continuously altered by changing conditions.

The second chapter, “Marriages in *Anna Karenina*,” expands the experimental model established in *Family Happiness* into a comparative structure by placing several marriages alongside one another. Rather than presenting a single model of domestic life, the novel constructs a system of parallel unions that reveal different forms of emotional and moral imbalance, including conflicts between romantic idealization and routine, personal desire and social duty, and expectation and lived experience. The chapter opens with a contextual section introducing the novel’s treatment of marriage and gender. The subsequent four sections each focus on one central marriage, namely unions of Stiva and Dolly, Anna and Karenin, Anna and Vronsky, and Levin and Kitty. “Stiva and Dolly” examines a marriage sustained through habit, tolerance of male infidelity, and unequal gendered labor. “Anna and Karenin” analyzes a decent yet loveless marriage, where a lack of emotional reciprocity drains the union long before Anna’s affair. “Anna and Vronsky” then considers the attempt to construct a relationship founded entirely on passion, demonstrating how desire detached from stable social structures gradually becomes destructive. Finally, the section “Levin and Kitty” examines the only marriage in the novel that achieves relative stability. Their relationship gradually abandons romantic idealization and acquires durability through conflict, domestic labor, and the repeated adjustments required by shared life.

Family Happiness as the First Model of Marriage

Leo Tolstoy's *Family Happiness* (1859) holds a central position in his intellectual and artistic development, bridging the early autobiographical mode of moral self-examination and the philosophical realism of his later novels. Situated between the youthful trilogy (*Childhood*, *Boyhood*, *Youth*) and the major narratives of *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, the novella, reflects Tolstoy's transition from diary-based introspection, concerned with sensuality, faith, and moral discipline, to a consciously crafted fictional form. In this position, *Family Happiness* marks his first sustained attempt to organize emotional life within marriage as a continuous process rather than a series of isolated events. The story of Masha and Sergey Mikhaylych, while presented as a domestic account of love and marital disillusionment, represents marriage as a temporal structure that organizes emotional experience, subjects it to repetition, and exposes it to change. This formalization of marriage as a process rather than a resolved state places the novella within a broader mid-nineteenth-century reconfiguration of marital relations. As Zalambani argues, *Family Happiness* emerges when marriage is redefined by society from a social contract governed by family interests and hierarchy into a union justified by personal feeling. However, as Zalambini shows, this reconfiguration of marital models does not stabilize the institution but makes it internally unstable since the expectations attached to emotional fulfillment exceed the conditions that marriage can sustain.¹⁴ In light of this historical account, Gary Morson's emphasis on the temporality in love and family clarifies the narrative significance of this instability: in Tolstoy's fiction, marriage can only be understood through duration, as emotional states acquire meaning when they are stretched out over time, subject to repetition, and modified by seemingly minor, everyday changes.¹⁵

¹⁴ Zalambani, *Institut braka v tvorchestve L. N. Tolstogo*, 7-9.

¹⁵ Gary Saul Morson, "Marriage, Love, and Time in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*," *Journal of Family Theory & Review* 2, no. 4 (2010): 354-356.

Zalambani's account situates the novella within a broader transformation of marital forms but her emphasis on competing models does not fully account for the specific mechanism through which Masha and Sergey's relationship changes. In Tolstoy's text, the instability of feeling-based marriage is structurally generated from within the experience of marriage itself. The ideal of emotional unity, once extended over time, becomes subject to asymmetry in development between spouses, heightened self-consciousness, and the intrusion of alternative forms of life beyond the domestic sphere. The initial mutual absorption between husband and wife gradually diverges into unequal desires, expectations, and perceptions, and this discrepancy cannot be resolved by appealing either to traditional duty or to the original intensity of their feelings. The narrative, therefore, does more than register a transition between marital models: it interrogates the conditions under which a feeling-based marriage can endure. This chapter builds on Zalambani's historical framework and incorporates Morson's insight into the temporal structure of lived experience, understood as the broader organization of experience through time. It shifts the focus to narrative form, reading *Family Happiness* as Tolstoy's first attempt to organize marriage into distinct experiential phases and to expose each phase to the pressures of duration, thereby establishing the experimental model that he later expanded in *Anna Karenina*.

Family Happiness is structured in two parts as the female protagonist's first-person retrospective memoir: in Part One, the seventeen-year-old orphan Masha lives in rural seclusion under the guidance of her late father's friend, Sergey, whose authority shapes her moral and emotional development and whom she subsequently marries. For Masha, their marriage at Nikolskoe initially produces a sense of complete happiness grounded in emotional unity and withdrawal from society, experienced as a self-contained state that resembles a "happily ever after" within the narrative. In Part Two, Masha grows restless with the monotony of rural life,

enters St. Petersburg society, and discovers a satisfaction in self-display, admiration and flirtation, which brings a split between her inner experience and her role as a wife. Sergey withdraws from both urban society and Masha in St. Petersburg, responding to her growing attraction to social attention with irritation and emotional distance. Although their marriage continues in a quieter domestic form, the novella isolates the core problems that will be developed in *Anna Karenina*: unequal moral frameworks between spouses, the exhaustion of passion over time, the gendered structure of marital experience, the destabilizing force of social visibility, or, in other words, the negative influence of urban society, and the emergence of stagnation and imbalance within the partnerships.

This chapter argues that *Family Happiness* constructs marriage as a sequence of distinct experimental stages (romantic expectation, social participation, and emotional separation) through which the viability of a feeling-based union is challenged over time. The novella presents marriage as a process in which emotional unity is gradually reshaped due to routine, social exposure, and unequal development between Masha and Sergey. The instability of the marriage is seen through Masha's retrospective first-person narration, which organizes each stage as a shift in the conditions influencing how she understands herself, her husband, and the institution of marriage.

The chapter is divided into three sections in accordance with the narrative organization of Masha's experience across the two parts of the novella: from seclusion to social exposure, and from shared emotional intensity to differentiated roles within the marriage. The stages reflect moments at which the conditions shaping the perception and evaluation of marriage change in a systematic fashion. Each section isolates a condition, such as emotional unity, social recognition, and moral stability, and traces its evolution under the influence of time. The first section, The

Romantic Hypothesis, explores the initial stage in which marriage is organized as an isolated emotional system based on seclusion, hierarchy, and immediacy of feeling. This section demonstrates how emotional unity is achieved through asymmetry and maintained by the absence of external pressures. The second section, Social Visibility and the Destabilization of Marriage, examines the transformation that occurs when Masha enters Petersburg high society and her experience becomes shaped by visibility, admiration, and comparison. In doing so, it introduces a kind of self-consciousness that destabilizes the earlier harmony of Masha's marriage by linking her sense of self with external evaluation. Finally, the third section, Moral Asymmetry and Gendered Experience in Marriage, considers the outcome of this transformation in terms of the divergence between Masha's developing emotional life and Sergey's fixed moral position, and the emergence of a stable but imbalanced form of marriage sustained through routine and adjustment. By framing the analysis in this way, the chapter demonstrates that *Family Happiness* establishes the limits of marriage as a form of life in a composed form that *Anna Karenina* will later radicalize.

The Romantic Hypothesis

Through the voice of its young female narrator, Marya Aleksandrovna (Masha), the novella tracks the psychological arc of an innocent girl who falls in love, enters marriage, and gradually reinterprets its meaning. But behind this domestic framework is a more systematic narrative design. What distinguishes this novella from his earlier works is not simply its subject but its structure: the narrative arranges the experience of love into a sequence of courtship, marriage, disillusionment, and reflection, so that the transformation of feelings becomes observable over time, anticipating a method that Tolstoy later develops more fully in *Anna Karenina*. In this

sense, the novella establishes what this chapter defines as the “romantic hypothesis”: the belief that mutual emotional harmony and shared feeling between spouses can provide a stable foundation for marriage. This section discusses how this hypothesis is constructed and what conditions make it viable.

The initial stage of the narrative creates a closed and controlled environment in which emotional unity can arise without resistance. The novella starts with an atmosphere of stillness. Masha’s family estate, Pokrovskoe, is an isolated household composed only of women and memories of the dead. Its timeless calm, its rhythm of routine and silence, and its maternal associations create what Anne Hrushka calls “a world both unchanging and overwhelmingly feminine,”¹⁶ a domestic space defined by “the house, its female inhabitants, and especially the dead mother, who continues to dominate the house.”¹⁷ Masha’s enclosed feminine world, consisting of her younger sister and governess, is less a setting than a condition of experience: it suspends development, limits external influence, and preserves continuity. When Sergey enters it as guardian and mentor, he introduces differences of age, gender, and experience, into a space that has so far excluded such distinctions. His presence initiates moral and emotional awakening, altering the balance of this environment. Pokrovskoe’s apparent harmony depends on its insulation from change, and the emergence of feeling within it already puts this stability at risk.

The coherence of Masha’s early experience is produced through retrospective narration, which structures her feelings into a stable and ordered account. The novella’s first-person narration is not immediate but conducted between Masha as a character and Masha as a narrator, recalling her past. The narrator is her older self, who revisits and reorganizes her young self’s experiences, presenting them as part of a coherent moral development. In terms of narrative

¹⁶ Anne Hrushka, “Love and Slavery: Serfdom, Emancipation, and Family in Tolstoy’s Fiction,” *The Russian Review* 66, no. 4 (2007): 635.

¹⁷ Hrushka, “Love and Slavery,” 635.

theory, this distinction aligns with Gérard Genette's definition of *voice* ("who speaks?) and *focalization* ("who sees?):¹⁸ even though Masha narrates in the first person, the perspective is not limited to her past self but filtered through her later understanding. This creates a layered form of narration in which immediacy is constantly reinterpreted. As William Edmiston argues, first-person narrators occupy a dual position, combining lived experience with retrospective interpretation,¹⁹ moving between what he calls "consonant" and "dissonant" self-narration.²⁰ Masha's narrative registers moments of distance from earlier experience but this distance does not grow into sustained dissonance. The ostensible transparency of her voice therefore masks a process of selection and ordering, through which experience is retrospectively employed into a stable and morally intelligible narrative of development.

This narrative filtering of experience becomes more complex when read in light of Tolstoy's authorial position, where Masha's voice reflects both personal memory and imposed framework of interpretation. Read alongside Tolstoy's relationship with Valeria Arsenieva²¹ – a young woman often identified as the prototype for Masha, whom he courted and considered marrying during the late 1850s, shortly before composing *Family Happiness*, before abandoning the match due to differences in maturity and expectations – the narrative voice acquires an additional layer of mediation. As Pavlov observes, Tolstoy "felt the psychological need of justifying himself, of

¹⁸ Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Cornell University Press, 1980), 161.

¹⁹ William F. Edmiston, "Focalization and the First-Person Narrator: A Revision of the Theory," *Poetics Today* 10, no. 4 (January 1, 1989): 731.

²⁰ Consonant self-narrators tend to align closely with their earlier selves and narrate past events with minimal retrospective interference, whereas dissonant narrators distance themselves from their earlier experience and interpret it critically; see Edmiston, "Focalization and the First-Person Narrator," 733.

²¹ Valeria Vladimirovna Arsenieva served as the main prototype for Masha, the narrator of *Family Happiness*. She, who came from a family closely connected with Tolstoy's own, was the woman with whom he was in love in 1856-1857. After the death of her father, Tolstoy became her little brother's guardian. Their relationship began at the Arseniev family estate near Yasnaya Polyana and ended when Tolstoy went abroad in 1857. In his letter to Biryukov of November 27, 1903, Tolstoy writes, "After that the most serious was Valeria Arsenieva. She is still alive, married to a Volkov, lives for the most part in Paris. I was almost engaged to her (*Family Happiness*), and there are whole bundles of my letters to her." This point has been observed by P. Pavlov, "Tolstoy's 'Family Happiness,'" *The Slavonic and East European Review* 7, no. 20 (1929): 495-496; and Zalambani, *Institut braka v tvorchestve L. N. Tolstogo*, 27.

showing that his conduct had been right by projecting himself into Valeria's mind and seeing himself through her eyes,"²² suggesting that Masha's perspective is shaped through authorial projection rather than developing as an independent female consciousness. Masha's voice is, therefore, far from a transparent record of female experience; rather, it becomes a site where personal memory, authorial self-justification, and narrative control intersect. This conforms to Kendall Walton's idea that the narrative does not present neutral facts but produces "fictional truths" shaped by the narrator's position and perspective.²³ In *Family Happiness*, that perspective is structured by a moral and ideological framework that shapes how female experience is represented. As Angelika Molnar argues, the text does not reproduce a genuine "female writing," despite its first-person female narration, since its discourse remains governed by a linear and didactic logic that resists the fragmentation and emotional excess typically associated with feminine narration.²⁴ The absence of a recognizably "female" mode of expression gives Masha's voice a specific character: it is composed, coherent, and morally certain, presenting an idealized model of female consciousness as constructed in Tolstoy's representation.

Masha constructs a coherent and controlled account of her experience by adopting a tone of apparent honesty that incorporates moments of uncertainty, contradiction, and even deception into a narrative of development. For instance, she recalls her initial discomfort with Sergey's "complete indifference and even contempt"²⁵ for her looks, yet this very attitude is later internalized as a moral principle, as she realizes that he "wished to make sure that [she] had not a trace of affectation."²⁶ In her effort to please him, Masha does not conceal obstacles and

²² P. Pavlov, "Tolstoy's 'Family Happiness,'" 500.

²³ Kendall L. Walton, "Points of View in Narrative and Depictive Representation," *Noûs* 10, no. 1 (March 1, 1976): 49-52, 54.

²⁴ Molnar, "Zhenskoe pis'mo i zhenskaia svoboda," 116-117.

²⁵ Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 5, *Proizvedeniia 1856-1859 gg.* (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo "Khudozhestvennaia literatura," 1935), 77.

²⁶ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 78.

inconsistencies: “a very obvious form of affectation took its place — an affectation of simplicity... Without wishing to deceive him, I did deceive him, and I became better myself while deceiving him.”²⁷ Here, deception is presented not as a moral failure but as an unintended result of her attempt to align herself with Sergey’s expectations. By emphasizing that she “did not wish” to deceive him, she frames the act as involuntary, whereas the claim that she “became better” changes it into a step in her moral development. In this way, the narrative embodies contradiction, sincerity expressed through deception, into a coherent narrative of growth, allowing Masha to appear both honest and morally progressing at the same time.

The narrative control extends to the way the emergence of love is represented, as Masha presents her feelings as natural and inevitable. Within the narrative framework, love appears to develop even before marriage as a part of a continuous and predictable process. The narrative makes Masha’s feelings appear natural by connecting them to seasonal change and the surrounding environment, presenting love as if it follows the same gradual and visible pattern as natural growth. Masha’s first emotions unfold in parallel with the transition from “dark and sad” winter to spring, and, as Edward Wasiolek notes, the novella “uses the natural seasons as an analogue to the movement of emotions,”²⁸ so that “life – and, in this specific instance, love – is right, real, and good when it is natural.”²⁹ This correspondence between feeling and nature makes her emotions easier to accept as real and justified as it gives emotional experience a sense of order and progression. The natural setting does not simply accompany her feelings but provides a framework that stabilizes them, giving the impression that her attachment develops organically and without interruption.

²⁷ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 78.

²⁸ Edward Wasiolek, *Tolstoy’s Major Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 41.

²⁹ Wasiolek, *Tolstoy’s Major Fiction*, 41.

The sense of gradual and natural development is constructed out of an earlier disturbance that reshapes Masha's inner life before it is recognized as love. During Sergey's first visit in March, his presence unsettles Pokrovskoe's enclosed world: at his departure Masha asks, "Must you really be away so long?"³⁰ and experiences "a sudden shock of regret,"³¹ together with the "fear that [her] depression would return."³² Masha's sudden attachment to him and her dependence on his presence begin to affect her usual routine, as she notes that "Instead of living as I had done at the beginning of winter, I read and played the piano and gave lessons to Sonya,"³³ demonstrating that her life has already been reorganized around him. By the time of his second visit at the end of May, however, this disturbance is reinterpreted within a narrative of gradual development. During his second visit, the description of the estate and landscape absorbs the earlier emotional shock by presenting everything as fully formed and settled: "the garden was all green,"³⁴ the birch foliage "transparent in the light of the setting sun,"³⁵ and the veranda filled with "shade and freshness,"³⁶ while "the tops of the round lilac bushes had a sprinkling of white and purple – a sign that their flowers were ready to open."³⁷ Within this setting, Sergey's naming of Masha as "violet" reinforces the same logic by identifying her with a natural form that is itself in the process of blooming. Her emotional state is thus aligned with the surrounding world, so that what begins as an emotional unsettlement is retrospectively understood as having unfolded gradually and organically over time.

The emergence of self-consciousness transforms Masha's happiness from an immediate experience into an object of reflection and interpretation, revealing the limits of the

³⁰ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 72.

³¹ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 72.

³² Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 72.

³³ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 73.

³⁴ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 73.

³⁵ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 73.

³⁶ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 73.

³⁷ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 73.

sentimentalist model in which nature guarantees emotional truth. As Natalia Kisseleff argues, *Family Happiness* “meets the criteria of sentimentalist poetics,”³⁸ where nature functions as an “instructor of refined sentiment leading to moral education.”³⁹ In the early parts of the novella, the alignment of inner feelings with the external world allows Masha’s happiness to look self-evident and unquestioned. However, once Masha begins to reflect on her own state, the correspondence of feelings with nature does not secure the authenticity of experience. As soon as Masha turns her attention to her own happiness, she does not simply experience happiness but turns it into an object of thought that she must affirm to herself and others: “I often got up... and told her [the governess] how perfectly happy I was.”⁴⁰ This change is also evident in her understanding of Sergey’s refusal to articulate his feelings. Instead of requiring verbal confirmation, she interprets his silence as sufficient proof, recalling his dismissal of conventional declarations of love and concluding, “I know that he loves me.”⁴¹ Love is thus not grounded in shared expression but in her own interpretation of his words, gestures, and behaviour. Instead of just feeling happy, she begins to observe her happiness from the outside. Although everything remains the same in her surroundings, it does not feel completely real: “we were really walking along the paths...and a withered leaf was really crackling... and that was really he...I ceased to believe in the reality of it all.”⁴² The sense of unreality does not come from an excess of happiness but from the intrusion of awareness into experience. Masha repeatedly insists on the reality of what surrounds her yet her insistence indicates a growing distance from original immediacy of what, prior to reflection, seemed natural and effortless.

³⁸ Natalia Kisseleff, “Idyll and Ideal: Aspects of Sentimentalism in Tolstoy’s *Family Happiness*, *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne Des Slavistes* 21, no. 3 (1979): 345.

³⁹ Kisseleff, “Idyll and Ideal,” 345.

⁴⁰ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 80.

⁴¹ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 86.

⁴² Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 88-89.

The analysis in this section shows that the romantic hypothesis relies on specific conditions that shape Masha's early experience of love. Her sense of happiness arises within seclusion at Pokrovskoe, under Sergey's guidance, and without the need to reflect on her own feelings. In this environment, her attachment seems natural and stable because it is supported by routine, isolation from society, and her dependence on Sergey's authority. When those conditions change, so does her experience. As Masha starts thinking about her feelings, the love that once felt simple and certain no longer feels that way. The change does not come from outside interference but from the fact that this initial state cannot be preserved. Masha's reflection and interpretation of love changes her understanding of both herself and Sergey, so that her feeling of unity with Sergey becomes dependent on how she evaluates it. As Zalambani argues, Masha's disillusionment and subsequent "repentance" function as symptoms of a broader crisis affecting the institution of marriage in mid-nineteenth century Russia.⁴³ The present analysis does not contradict this claim but relocates the source of instability to an earlier stage, showing that it is already present within the formation of love itself, before marriage takes place. The problem lies not only in the failure of the institution but in the fact that Masha's feelings lose certainty once she begins to think about and evaluate them. This internal instability becomes more visible when Masha leaves the closed environment of rural estates and later enters Petersburg society, where she becomes more focused on judging her own feelings and on how others see her. In St. Petersburg, her experience is not only limited to her relationship with Sergey but is also shaped by attention, admiration, and comparison, marking the transition to the next stage of the narrative.

⁴³ Zalambani, *Institut braka v tvorchestve L. N. Tolstogo*, 27.

Social Visibility and the Destabilization of Marriage

The second half of *Family Happiness* relocates Tolstoy's moral experiment from a private, controlled environment to a social setting in which relationships are exposed to visibility and judgement. The move from Pokrovskoe and Nikolskoe (Sergey's rural estate) to St. Petersburg introduces a space where emotional life is constantly seen, evaluated, and compared. It is worthwhile noting that the movement from a secluded rural environment to social life in Petersburg reflects a broader pattern in Tolstoy's fiction, where spatial opposition organizes moral experience: as Mangold notes, "the contrast between life in cities and rural country existence became increasingly clear in Russia,"⁴⁴ functioning as a spatial model for psychological and social tensions. Within this framework, the rural estate allows for a more self-contained and stable form of life, whereas the city presents a more "artificially limited form of space, consuming human energy, restricting man's activity and spiritual development."⁴⁵ Morson, however, distinguishes St. Petersburg from other cities by describing it as an "abstract and intentional city," one that is not the product of organic development but of rational design.⁴⁶ His characterization suggests that St. Petersburg intensifies the effects of urban life by placing people within an environment organized by artificial forms of visibility and social interaction. In *Family Happiness*, moving to St. Petersburg exposes Masha to attention and admiration that she embraces, distancing her from her relationship with Sergey. The move to the city, which she initiates, places her within a social world that encourages vanity and self-display, while Sergey, who rejects this corrupting urban world, nonetheless allows it but responds by withdrawing from her as her behaviour changes.

⁴⁴ Matthew Mangold, "Space and Storytelling in Late Imperial Russia: Tolstoy, Chekhov, and the Question of Property," *The Russian Review* 76, no. 1 (2017): 74.

⁴⁵ Andrzej Dudek, "Leo Tolstoy's Urban Anthropology," *Rusycystyczne Studia Literaturoznawcze* 26 (2016): 79.

⁴⁶ Morson, *Anna Karenina in Our Time*, 146; Morson, "Marriage, Love, and Time," 357.

This section argues that the move to the city transforms both Masha's feelings and the structure of her marriage: her bond with Sergey, once grounded in private emotional unity, becomes subject to external recognition, as her feelings become inseparable from how she is seen by others and from the attention that flatters her vanity. It then examines how this exposure creates a new awareness of her own body, in which admiration and sexual attraction destabilize her sense of moral control. Also, it traces Sergey's rejection of urban society and his response to Masha's transformation, as he withdraws from her and avoids direct emotional engagement. As a result, this section demonstrates that marriage becomes the setting in which neither response can be sustained: Masha's sensitivity to social attention weakens her attachment to Sergey, while Sergey's effort to preserve moral purity leads him to withdraw from the relationship. In this way, the Petersburg chapters set a pattern that will be further explored in *Anna Karenina*, where visibility initially amplifies desire but later subjects it to moral judgment, as Masha's experience anticipates the trajectory of Anna and Vronsky's relationship.

Social visibility does not simply alter Masha's experience in the moment but restructures the very basis on which happiness is later understood. In retrospect, happiness is not presented as a self-sustaining inner state anymore but dependent on external conditions and conscious evaluation. When Masha recalls this period of her life, she describes it through a series of external markers: "I was then twenty-one; our financial position was, I believed, satisfactory; my domestic life gave me all that I asked of it; everyone I knew, it seemed to me, loved me...I was the best-dressed woman in Baden...the weather was fine; I enjoyed the atmosphere of beauty and refinement."⁴⁷ She then contrasts this state with her early married life at Nikolskoe, Sergey's rural estate, when "my happiness was in myself..."⁴⁸ The comparison demonstrates that the shift

⁴⁷ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 127-128.

⁴⁸ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 128.

brought by social life is structural: happiness does not stem from immediate emotional experience but becomes mediated by social position, appearance, and circumstance. Although nature remains present in her narrative, it does not confirm the authenticity of her feelings. Instead, it marks the distance between an earlier state of unreflective immediacy and a later experience shaped by visibility and self-consciousness.

Social visibility transforms sincerity into performance by making Masha's emotional life dependent on recognition, admiration, and desire. In the ballroom and salon, feeling no longer functions as a private relation between self and truth but as a visible act, measured through the eyes of others. Masha explicitly acknowledges that social attention pleases her, admitting that "the attention of so many people in society gave me satisfaction, flattered my vanity,"⁴⁹ even as she is unable to articulate that to Sergey and "was ashamed and said nothing."⁵⁰ She cannot share her newly discovered enjoyment of being admired in society with her husband. At the same time, this social visibility does not remain at the level of vanity but develops into a sexual attraction, as admiration becomes inseparable from bodily response. As Irina Reyfman notes, in *Family Happiness* the female body becomes the surface on which social meaning is written, and that the heroine's self-awareness is inseparable from her awareness of being looked at.⁵¹ Under these conditions, awareness of being seen becomes the basis through which Masha interprets her own feelings. In this regard, she does not feel desire naturally on her own; she becomes aware of it through the attention she receives from others, redirecting her emotional focus away from her marriage.

⁴⁹ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 119.

⁵⁰ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 119.

⁵¹ Irina Reyfman, "Female Voice and Male Gaze in Leo Tolstoy's *Family Happiness*," in *Rank and Style: Russians in State Service, Life, and Literature* (Boston, USA: Academic Studies Press, 2012), 177-178.

Social admiration also changes how Masha sees herself: for the first time, she becomes aware of her beauty as publicly noticed and valued by others. The foreign prince's declaration that Masha is "the most beautiful woman in Russia"⁵² establishes her value through public recognition and triggers a conflict with Sergey. His response to Masha's decision to attend the party makes his position clear: when she looks at him, "our eyes met, and he turned away at once,"⁵³ and hears the cold detachment in his response that "it rests with her entirely."⁵⁴ Masha understands his position but nevertheless chooses to go, insisting, "I shall go to the party on Saturday without fail,"⁵⁵ and thereby prioritizing social attention over marital harmony. Entering the reception, she is already positioned within a field of visibility shaped by that choice. When the prince approaches Masha, her response takes the form of painful self-consciousness: she is "seized by a sudden sense of shame and pain"⁵⁶ and "blushed all over [her] face and neck under the Prince's eye,"⁵⁷ while Sergey turns away from across the room. Masha's blush reveals her discomfort at becoming the object of attention and shows the distance that has emerged between her attraction to social admiration and Sergey's values.

Where the reception scene confines Masha's response to shame, the subsequent encounter with the Italian marquis extends that experience into physical contact, where her reaction to his attention and physical proximity develops into involuntary bodily desire. When his "ungloved fingers touched [her] arm,"⁵⁸ Masha experiences "a feeling new to me, half horror and half pleasure,"⁵⁹ and that reaction undermines her sense of control. Fear does not lead to resistance but coexists with attraction as Masha's body reacts in a way that her judgement cannot yet

⁵² Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 120.

⁵³ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 120.

⁵⁴ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 120.

⁵⁵ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 122.

⁵⁶ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 124.

⁵⁷ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 124.

⁵⁸ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 131.

⁵⁹ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 131.

process. As the marquis continues to hold and press her arm, “fever ran through [her] veins,”⁶⁰ her “sight grew dim,”⁶¹ and “the words intended to check him died in [her] throat,”⁶² showing how her ability to refuse gives way to physical attraction. In that state, Masha remains “trembling all over...horrified, expectant, even desirous,”⁶³ so that fear, passivity, and anticipation of physical contact merge into a single experience. The sexual tension continues as she becomes aware of “an irresistible longing to surrender myself”⁶⁴ to the same contact she perceives as “repugnant and alien.”⁶⁵ At this point, the moral problem lies not in action but in desire to sin itself since the awareness of wanting what she knows to be wrong already compromises her sense of virtue. Masha’s desire therefore emerges through proximity, touch, and the awareness of being desired rather than as an independent inner feeling. Her moral awareness is present, as she recognizes “the moment [when the Italian marquis kisses Masha’s cheek] was horrible,”⁶⁶ but moral judgement does not govern her response as the bodily reaction overrides it. The sequence of events, beginning with social admiration and culminating in near-infidelity, transforms Masha’s virtue from an internal moral principle into a matter of appearance. As she comes to view her own goodness, beauty, and sexuality through the eyes of others, her body becomes an object of perception both for others and for herself, and her destabilized sense of right and wrong weakens her attachment to Sergey. Masha’s recognition of her own desirability and responsiveness anticipates the dynamic later developed in *Anna Karenina* through the relationship between Anna and Vronsky, where desire emerges in public and is immediately bound up with shame, judgment, and moral conflict.

⁶⁰ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 131.

⁶¹ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 131.

⁶² Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 131.

⁶³ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 131.

⁶⁴ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 132.

⁶⁵ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 131.

⁶⁶ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 131.

Sergey's response to Masha's transformation in the city begins with his rejection of urban society itself and extends into a growing resistance to Masha's participation in it. From the beginning, he treats social life as corrupting and refuses to engage in it but this distance becomes strained once Masha begins to enjoy the admiration that society offers her. Although he tolerates her participation at first, it soon becomes a source of tension because her popularity directly undermines the moral framework he seeks to preserve. A moral judgement that he does not initially articulate becomes explicit in their quarrel, where he accuses her of "run[ning] to meet"⁶⁷ the Prince and "forgetting your husband and yourself and womanly dignity."⁶⁸ His ideal of restraint, self-command, and detachment assumes that virtue can be maintained by avoiding exposure to temptation but St. Petersburg forces him into the situation he rejects: a shared life in which Masha's desires are shaped by forces he cannot control. His discomfort is therefore relational and directed specifically at her transformation under the gaze of others, and it manifests itself through irritation, coldness, and withdrawal. In one of their confrontations, Masha notices that he "spoke in a tone of suppressed irritation"⁶⁹ and that she had "never before heard such coldness in his tone to me, and never before seen such coldness in his eyes."⁷⁰ His rejection of society is now shown as emotional distance from his wife since he withdraws not only from social life but from the reciprocity that marriage requires. The qualities that formerly appeared dignified in Pokrovskoe and Nikolskoe become rigidity and pride in St. Petersburg. As Pavlov notes, Sergey "did look for a compromise and was in consequence unhappy,"⁷¹ and this unhappiness shows that his attempt to preserve virtue by avoiding society fails in marriage, where he must respond to his wife's behaviour since he cannot avoid his wife's involvement in it.

⁶⁷ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 122.

⁶⁸ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 122.

⁶⁹ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 120.

⁷⁰ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 121.

⁷¹ Pavlov, "Tolstoy's 'Family Happiness,'" 506-507.

Sergey's response thus shows the opposite side of Masha's development: while she becomes increasingly drawn to social attention, he tries to avoid it, and this difference affects the emotional connection their marriage depends on.

Masha's turn toward social attention and desire along with Sergey's effort to preserve virtue through withdrawal show that social visibility does not simply introduce external pressure on marriage but changes how both feeling and moral judgement function within it. These responses represent two incompatible ways of living that fail when subjected to the demands of shared life. Sergey's position, in particular, reflects a larger moral pattern that extends beyond the narrative itself. As Ernest Simmons observes, Tolstoy's early writings describe "a manly struggle against excesses" driven by "a craving to bring order into the chaos of life,"⁷² a model of self-mastery that seeks stability through restraint. Within marriage, however, such an approach fails since Sergey cannot withdraw from his wife's transformation without also withdrawing from the relationship itself. Marriage, in this context, does not resolve the tension between responsiveness and moral control but exposes the limits of both positions by forcing partners to confront each other's incompatible ways of living. At the same time, social visibility does not affect both partners in the same way. Masha's experience develops through attention, exposure, and desire, while Sergey responds through judgement and withdrawal, placing them in unequal positions within the marriage. As a result, they do not share the same emotional and moral position within their marriage. The next section examines this moral asymmetry more closely, showing how desire, judgement, and responsibility are distributed differently between them and how this difference becomes central to Tolstoy's broader exploration of marital life.

⁷² Ernest J. Simmons, "Tolstoy Gets Married," *The Russian Review* 1, no. 1 (1941): 40.

Moral Asymmetry and Gendered Experience in Marriage

The final chapter of *Family Happiness* shows that the tensions introduced by social visibility do not disappear in marriage but are reorganized into a durable asymmetry that defines the later stages of the relationship. This section argues that Masha and Sergey's marriage becomes stable because they respond to these tensions differently, and this difference prevents their conflict from developing further. As Masha continues to experience the loss of their earlier closeness and measures the present against it, Sergey withdraws from this emotional register and treats the relationship as settled. Because he does not engage with the relationship on her terms, Masha does not turn her dissatisfaction into conflict and a distance forms between them. Their return to the country therefore does not restore the earlier unity grounded in shared emotional immediacy; instead, it produces a form of coexistence in which they occupy different emotional and moral positions within the same marriage. This asymmetry is both moral and gendered: Masha continues to understand the relationship through her longing for earlier intimacy and her attempts to preserve its meaning, while Sergey redefines love in terms that exclude emotional excess. As a result, they remain within the same marriage but do not experience it in the same way. This section examines how this asymmetry is shown in three moments of the final chapter: first, in the emotional distance that organizes their life at Nikolskoe; second, in Masha's growing attachment to her child as her attention shifts away from Sergey; and finally, in the conflicting accounts of love articulated in the veranda dialogue, where Masha and Sergey share their conflicting accounts of love and marriage.

The asymmetry in how Masha and Sergey interpret and respond to their relationship becomes visible during their everyday life at Nikolskoe, where emotional distance replaces earlier intimacy without producing open conflict. After their return from St. Petersburg, their

relationship is described as “coldly friendly to each other,”⁷³ capturing a mode of coexistence in which shared intimacy has been replaced by habitual restraint. The domestic space reinforces this division: for Masha, “each room and wall and sofa recalled what he had once been to me, and what I had lost,”⁷⁴ so that the home preserves the memory of emotional closeness and keeps her oriented toward that loss. Sergey, by contrast, relates to the same domestic space without this sense of loss: Masha observes that he “did not give his whole heart and mind to me as he used to do,”⁷⁵ but also that he “did not give it to anyone or anything,”⁷⁶ suggesting, from her perspective, not emotional suffering but a withdrawal from emotional investment altogether. Because Masha does not share with Sergey about her sense of loss, her dissatisfaction remains confined to her own perspective and is revealed only through her narration. In this sense, Sergey has nothing to respond to, as the comparison she makes between their present life and the past is not expressed in their interaction. Since the problem is neither voiced by her nor taken up by him, it does not develop into open conflict and the distance between them becomes part of their “stable” marriage.

The presence of their child redirects Masha’s emotional life away from the marriage without producing a comparable transformation in Sergey. When the nurse brings in the baby, Masha’s response is immediate and physical: “Mine, mine, mine!”⁷⁷ It is accompanied by “an impulse of joy in every limb that I found it hard to restrain myself from hurting him,”⁷⁸ shifting her from reflective dissatisfaction to direct emotional attachment. The child gives her a clear object for feeling that her relationship with Sergey does not provide anymore, replacing uncertainty and longing with a sense of possession and emotional certainty. Sergey’s response, however, remains

⁷³ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 134.

⁷⁴ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 134.

⁷⁵ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 134.

⁷⁶ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 134.

⁷⁷ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 143.

⁷⁸ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 143.

limited in scope: he tickles the baby and calls him “Ivan Sergeich!,”⁷⁹ participating in the scene without undergoing any comparable reorientation of his emotional life. Although Masha observes that “his eyes smiled as he looked at me,”⁸⁰ and briefly experiences “an ease and happiness which I had not felt for a long time,”⁸¹ this shared moment does not restore mutual intimacy but introduces a different basis for connection. Their marriage stabilizes through parenthood but this stability depends on a redistribution rather than a renewal of emotional life: Masha’s attachment is concentrated in the child, while Sergey remains composed and relatively detached, anticipating a mode of emotional distance Tolstoy develops further in *Karenin*. Parenthood thus preserves the existing division between them, providing a feasible form of coexistence without eliminating the underlying asymmetry.

The veranda dialogue makes explicit that the asymmetry between Masha and Sergey is based on different understandings of how love moves from early passion toward more stable forms of attachment. In his fiction, Tolstoy repeatedly explores the temporal progression of feeling, allowing early emotional intensities to dissolve, reconfigure, or discover in new forms as characters grow older.⁸² Sergey expresses this understanding of love when he states that “each time of life has its own kind of love,”⁸³ presenting the loss of earlier passion not as failure but as a necessary transition toward stability. His further admission, “I was to blame... I ought either to have kept myself from loving you at all, or to have loved you in a simpler way,”⁸⁴ clarifies that he understands love in such a way that it must be disciplined and reduced in intensity in order to remain sustainable. In the setting of rural estate, where the stillness of the evening, the spring rain, and the scent of lilac generate a space for reflection, Sergey’s view that love must change

⁷⁹ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 143.

⁸⁰ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 143.

⁸¹ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 143.

⁸² McLean, “‘Buried as a Writer’,” 18-19.

⁸³ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 141.

⁸⁴ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 142.

over time and thereby become stable appears coherent and internally consistent. Masha, on the other hand, does not share the same stance on transformation. For her, the change in their relationship is not a transition but a loss, expressed in her sense that “all that formed my happiness”⁸⁵ has been taken from her. The scene therefore brings both emotional disagreement and structural divergence: Sergey interprets the decline of passion as a necessary for a calmer and more sustainable form of marital life, while Masha experiences it as deprivation and the erosion of meaning. His capacity to redefine love allows him to accept and maintain a stable position within the marriage, whereas her continued attachment to earlier intensity leaves her in a state of longing. In this way, their conversation on the veranda about changing nature of love brings into view two different temporal understandings of feeling and illuminates the asymmetry between Sergey and Masha built into their respective views of love itself.

The ending of *Family Happiness* does not resolve the earlier division between spouses but stabilizes it by replacing emotional reciprocity with a different form of attachment. The ending therefore presents neither complete fulfillment nor failure: the marriage survives through accommodation and coexistence. Masha concludes her narrative with her final definition of family happiness: “that day ended the romance of our marriage; the old feeling became a precious irrecoverable remembrance; but a new feeling of love for my children and the father of my children laid the foundation of a new life and a quite different happiness; and that life and happiness have lasted to the present time.”⁸⁶ Her formulation makes clear that the early love is not restored but reassigned to memory and it functions as the interpretive pivot of the novella. The marriage continues yet its emotional core has changed: intimacy is not based in shared passion anymore but in the ongoing practices of family life, including care for children and

⁸⁵ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 141.

⁸⁶ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5: 143.

mutual responsibility. The child-oriented reorganization gives Masha a stable framework for living by redirecting her emotional investment toward her role as a mother. Sergey, meanwhile, stays consistent with the position he adopts earlier, maintaining a moderated form of attachment that does not depend on emotional intensity. The result is a stable form of coexistence in which both partners remain within the marriage but they do not share the same emotional experience, since stability requires accepting the loss of reciprocity rather than overcoming it.

A child-centered reorganization allows Masha and Sergey's marriage to achieve coherence by expanding affection across roles and stages of life. Love is not tied to a single emotional intensity but redistributed across the structures of family, where attachment is maintained through care, continuity, and shared responsibility. In this form, happiness is not immediate or self-sufficient but develops gradually through the routines of domestic life, as meaning accumulates over time rather than emerging from moments of passion. The final image of *Family Happiness* therefore presents a model of marriage that is stable and durable yet built on a transformation of its original terms. This outcome clarifies the logic of Tolstoy's experiment: marriage does not preserve feeling but reshapes it into a form that can endure. The scope of this experimental logic is greatly expanded in *Anna Karenina*, where Tolstoy does not confine the test to a single relationship but constructs a system of parallel marriages that challenge different ways of organizing emotional and moral life. While *Family Happiness* isolates one union as a controlled space in which feeling is challenged and redefined, *Anna Karenina* enlarges that space by juxtaposing contrasting unions of Stiva and Dolly, Anna and Karenin, Anna and Vronsky, and Levin and Kitty, into implicit comparison, allowing to examine how desire, judgement, and responsibility function across multiple forms of marriage.

Marriages in *Anna Karenina*

Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, written between 1873 to 1877 and first published serially in *The Russian Messenger* (*Russkiy Vestnik*) before appearing in book form in 1878, is widely regarded as one of the greatest masterpieces of nineteenth-century realist fiction. Set within Russian aristocratic society, the novel explores intimate aspects of personal life, particularly marriage, family relations, and the conflict between personal desire and social obligation. For the purposes of this chapter, this broader social and narrative framework is essential because it allows Tolstoy to move beyond the single-marriage focus of *Family Happiness* and to construct a comparative system of relationships. Within this expanded structure, marriage is not presented as a unified or stable form but as a shared life that becomes unstable when spouses do not align in their feelings, expectations, and ways of living together. By placing multiple couples side by side, Tolstoy shows how different kinds of marriages function in practice, revealing how each pair lives, feels, and interacts within society.

The novel's opening claim, "All happy families are alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way,"⁸⁷ establishes the narrative logic through which marriage is explored, suggesting that marital conflict rather than domestic stability provides the conditions for narrative development. As Gary Saul Morson notes, the aphorism rests on an asymmetry between happiness and narrativity: happy families, precisely because they lack dramatic events, and "have no history," while unhappy families are marked by difficulty, contingency, and therefore by story.⁸⁸ In this sense, happiness resists narration, whereas unhappiness generates it; the more "story" there is, the less stable happiness becomes. *Anna Karenina* takes this asymmetry as its starting point, focusing on marriages in which alignment between spouses' emotional life, moral

⁸⁷ Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 18, *Anna Karenina*, *chasti 1-4* (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo "Khudozhestvennaia literatura," 1934), 3.

⁸⁸ Morson, *Anna Karenina in Our Time*, 35.

orientation, and shared forms of living breaks down and becomes narratable. Throughout the narrative, Tolstoy returns to marriage as the main paradigm to articulate and challenge the questions of duty, desire, faith, and social belonging. Instead of providing a single model of marital life, he constructs a continuum of relationships that explores different ways of organizing marriage, ranging from destructive and unstable unions to more durable forms of domestic life, exposing tensions between marriage as a stable social form and the lived realities within it.

The tension between marriages that continue to function through habit, social expectation, and the absence of shared feeling between spouses, though, is not resolved through explicit moral commentary but embedded within the structure of the realist novel itself. As K. M. Newton argues, intentionally adopts the traditions of the realist novel, including its focus on contemporary life, intimate relationships, and psychological depth, not to affirm the values associated with it but to subvert it internally, allowing “the intrinsic tensions and irresolvable contradictions within the secularist and humanist view of life” to emerge through narrative form.⁸⁹ Marriage thus becomes the site where these contradictions are lived rather than resolved since the promise of unity is repeatedly undermined by the divergence between inner experience and external form. Although, as F. R. Leavis suggests, the novel’s treatment of relations between men and women raises questions about how to live and what constitutes a meaningful life; the novel approaches these questions through contrasting forms of marriage and domestic life.⁹⁰ *Anna Karenina*, therefore, does not idealize or reject marriage; rather, it addresses it as a demanding moral practice whose viability depends on the capacity to sustain alignment between inner life and social form.

⁸⁹ K. M. Newton, “Tolstoy’s Intention in ‘Anna Karenina,’” *The Cambridge Quarterly* 11, no. 3 (1983): 361.

⁹⁰ F. R. Leavis, “*Anna Karenina*: Thought and Significance in a Great Creative Work,” *The Cambridge Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (1965), 8.

In *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy approaches marriage as an institution capable of continuing to function publicly even when it has lost its emotional and moral coherence. A marriage that seems stable in public is maintained through appearance and performance: good manners, social routines, legal bonds substitute for intimacy and shared moral purpose. As Gayle Greene argues, the novel exposes “the sham of its conventions and morality,”⁹¹ portraying a social world in which adultery is tolerated as long as it remains manageable and discreet, “condemned only if it is not kept casual.”⁹² In this type of world, marriages are judged primarily through visible signs (e.g., reputation, propriety, and domestic order), even when its inner reality has already become unstable or fractured. The institution thus preserves itself externally even if its inner foundations collapsed: the roles of husband and wife remain in place but the marriage no longer fulfills the moral and emotional functions it claims to secure. Tolstoy’s critique lies not in presenting marriage as incapable of organizing life but rather in showing that marriage can maintain social order too effectively through norms and reputation, preserving its outward form even when it conceals the very crises it is supposed to address.

It is also important to note that Tolstoy does not represent marriage as inherently oppressive or devoid of meaning. His critique directed not at the institution itself but its reduction to a purely formal or performative arrangement. As his adherence to the “idea of family” (*mysl’ semeinuiu*), which he regarded as the governing principle of *Anna Karenina*,⁹³ suggests, marriage remains for Tolstoy a core moral structure through which life acquires coherence and significance. Even critics such as Gayle Greene, while attentive to the novel’s gendered assumptions, acknowledge that it upholds the ideal of home and family as a “bulwark” against

⁹¹ Greene, “Women, Character, and Society,” 108.

⁹² Greene, “Women, Character, and Society,” 108.

⁹³ Barbara Lönnqvist, “Anna Karenina,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Tolstoy*, ed. Donna Tussing Orwin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 80-81.

social disorientation.⁹⁴ In this respect, marriage functions as a site of ethical labor: a domain in which individuals come to learn the limits of the self, transform feeling into responsibility, and attempt to sustain forms of attachment that endure beyond passion. Tolstoy's objection, therefore, targets marriages that do exist only as outward duty or, conversely, only as unregulated passion. Against both extremes, the novel envisions the possibility, though never the guarantee, of a form of marriage capable of sustaining love over time.

Marriage in *Anna Karenina* functions as a social and legal arrangement that places unequal demands on husband and wife, requiring the woman to preserve the family while allowing the man greater freedom. As Gayle Green shows, Tolstoy treats domestic life as the central sphere of female existence, where a woman's role as wife and mother defines her position, whereas male characters remain free to participate in intellectual and social life beyond the household.⁹⁵ This difference can be seen in the contrast between Stiva and Anna: Stiva's infidelity does not remove him from his family or society, whereas Anna's relationship with Vronsky leads to her exclusion from both. As feminist criticism has shown, it is less about a matter of individual morality than how marriage is structured: the same action does not have the same consequences for husband and wife. As Amy Mandelker argues, Anna is judged as a "fallen woman," placed in a position where she cannot answer the judgment aimed at her, so that her actions are read as personal failure rather than as responses to the limits of her role as a wife.⁹⁶ In this sense, marriage does not impose equal obligations on spouses but holds the wife responsible for preserving its moral and social order.

⁹⁴ Greene, "Women, Character, and Society," 113.

⁹⁵ Greene, "Women, Character, and Society," 110-112.

⁹⁶ Amy Mandelker, *Framing Anna Karenina: Tolstoy, the Woman Question, and the Victorian Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1993), 38-39.

The unequal structure of marriage in terms of gendered demands manifests a larger pattern of Tolstoy's fictional writings, where women are shaped by expectations created by men. As Barbara Heldt argues, Tolstoy "comes to blame men for creating women in the image that suited them, in life as in art,"⁹⁷ showing his move from the belief that man can shape a "good woman" to the recognition that men are too limited to produce anything other than "a caricature of their own desires."⁹⁸ This logic also shapes the marriages in *Anna Karenina*, where women are expected to inhabit the roles already defined through male expectations and social demands. The role of wife and mother is therefore not a neutral social role but one structured in advance, so that any departure from it is treated as failure. Heldt's analysis helps explain why Anna's attempt to live outside the role assigned to her cannot be realized within a marriage: the structure itself leaves little room for a different form of life for a wife. Mary Evans also shows that Anna's relationship with Vronsky puts her in direct conflict with the expectations of family life, where the woman must maintain continuity and care for children.⁹⁹ When Anna leaves her husband, she cannot return to the position of wife and mother defined by her earlier family life, and no alternative social position is available to her. As Kuzmic notes, *Anna Karenina* presents woman as "the symbolic object of exchange between men,"¹⁰⁰ so that Anna's removal from marriage leaves her without a stable social position of her own. In this respect, Anna's inability to return or assume an alternative position reveals that marriage does not fail in the same way for men and women, a disparity that comes into focus when her situation is set against the parallel unions of Stiva and Dolly, Anna and Karenin, Anna and Vronsky, and Levin and Kitty.

⁹⁷ Barbara Heldt, "Tolstoy's Path toward Feminism," in *Terrible Perfection: Women and Russian Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 48.

⁹⁸ Heldt, "Tolstoy's Path toward Feminism," 48.

⁹⁹ Evans, *Reflecting on Anna Karenina*, 8-10, 16.

¹⁰⁰ Tatiana Kuzmic, "The Mind, the Body, and the Love Triangle in *Anna Karenina*," *Tolstoy Studies Journal* 19 (2007): 6.

This chapter argues that *Anna Karenina* designs marriage as a comparative field in which its moral, emotional, and social functions are tested across different relational forms, shedding light on both its necessity and its internal conflicts. Rather than offering a single model to be affirmed or rejected, Tolstoy presents a series of marriages that show how an institution can persist despite moral failures (Stiva and Dolly), collapse under the pressure of incompatible principles (Anna and Karenin), attempt to reconstitute itself outside social and legal frameworks (Anna and Vronsky), and achieve relative stability through shared moral development (Levin and Kitty). By reading these relationships together, the chapter shows that the instability of marriage in the novel is structured by asymmetrical gendered demands that determine whose failures are tolerable and whose are not. The chapter proceeds by first examining the Oblonsky marriage as a model of tolerated male transgression sustained by female labor and routine, then turning to the Karenin marriage to analyze how a marriage can function without emotional reciprocity, before considering Anna and Vronsky's quasi-marriage as an unsustainable attempt to replace institutional structure with passion alone, and finally concluding with Levin and Kitty as a marriage that achieves a resolution grounded in shared moral work.

Stiva and Dolly

The marriage of Stepan Arkadyevitch (Stiva) and Darya Alexandrovna (Dolly) is the first image of matrimony that Tolstoy presents in the beginning of *Anna Karenina*, and it establishes from the beginning that marriage cannot be understood through a single model of love. As Morson argues, the novel distinguishes between different kinds of love, most importantly, between hedonistic love, which seeks immediate pleasure, and prosaic love, which is cultivated over time, habit, and attention to the ordinary.¹⁰¹ According to Morson, the Oblonsky marriage

¹⁰¹ Morson, "Marriage, Love, and Time," 354-355, 362.

brings these two forms into direct conflict: Stiva treats marriage as a structure that should accommodate his pursuit of pleasure, while Dolly perceives it as an ongoing moral and practical commitment that must be maintained regardless of personal suffering. Morson's account is important in identifying this contrast, particularly in demonstrating that Stiva's infidelity is not driven by passion but by a hedonistic orientation to life, in which present enjoyment overrides responsibility to both family and future.¹⁰² His reading of Tolstoy's "prosaics" explains that daily care, attention, repetition, and other trivial things compose the genuine substance of moral life.¹⁰³ However, his interpretation treats the difference between Stiva's hedonistic orientation and Dolly's prosaic commitment as a contrast between types of love, whereas in Tolstoy's narrative it is also structured by unequal demands placed on husband and wife. In other words, Morson does not account for the fact that only Dolly is required to sustain the marriage: Stiva continues his affairs while remaining within marriage, and Dolly must preserve the family even after his betrayal. The presentation of marriage as a system that continues despite internal breakdown is shaped through a third-person narration that shifts between characters, revealing the institution through the differing perceptions of those who inhabit it.

The opening of the Oblonsky storyline presents marriage as a social structure whose consequences reach beyond the relationship between the spouses themselves. The narrator places the reader right into the crisis: "Everything was in confusion in the Oblonskys' house."¹⁰⁴ The reason behind this disorder is stated immediately in a very direct manner: "The wife had discovered that the husband was carrying on an intrigue with a French girl, who had been a governess in their family, and she had announced to her husband that she could not go on living

¹⁰² Morson, "Marriage, Love, and Time," 356-357.

¹⁰³ Morson, "Marriage, Love, and Time," 358-359, 361-362.

¹⁰⁴ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 3.

in the same house with him.”¹⁰⁵ The narrative then shifts to time, “this position of affairs had now lasted three days,”¹⁰⁶ and traces its effects across the household, “the children ran wild all over the house; the English governess quarreled with the housekeeper, and wrote to a friend asking her to look out for a new situation for her; the man-cook had walked off the day before just at dinner time...”¹⁰⁷ At this point, the situation is presented from an external position, outlining the breakdown of the household and its visible consequences. The narrative thus positions marriage as the organizing principle of domestic life: when trust between spouses collapses, servants become disoriented, children lose supervision, and daily routines fall apart. The crisis is not presented as a melodramatic confrontation but rather as disruption of a structure that includes labor, hierarchy and dependency.

From within the destabilized Oblonsky family, the narrative allows the reader to enter Stiva’s mind which reveals his charm, appetite, and moral lightness. We see almost the entire marital crisis through Stiva’s perspective, reading his thoughts as he wakes up “not in his wife’s bedroom, but on the leather-covered sofa in his study.”¹⁰⁸ The first thing that crosses his mind is a dream of fancy dinners and animated crockery, a world defined by pleasure and sociability. It is not until this dream is overtaken by the memory of the quarrel, and then, too, his moral reflection acquires an odd character: “Yes, she won’t forgive me, and she can’t forgive me. And the most awful thing about it is that it’s all my fault – all my fault, though I’m not to blame. That’s the point of the whole situation.”¹⁰⁹ Stiva is a man capable of eloquently expressing guilt but to him it is more of fleeting discomfort, not a necessity for self-revision. The narrator explains that what troubled him most was that “he had not succeeded better in hiding it from his wife.”¹¹⁰ He regrets

¹⁰⁵ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 3.

¹⁰⁶ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 3.

¹⁰⁷ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 3.

¹⁰⁸ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 3.

¹⁰⁹ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 4.

¹¹⁰ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 5.

not the betrayal of his wife, but its exposure, so his affair troubles him only because he has been found out, not because he questions his own conduct. Stiva's temperament inclines him to the present and to the preservation of personal comfort. Even his memory of Dolly is evaluatively detached: she is "a worn-out woman no longer young or good-looking, and in no way remarkable or interesting, merely a good mother."¹¹¹ His wording reduces her from a partner to someone defined only by her function in the household, so that her value lies in caring for the children and maintaining daily life rather than in their relationship. In this way, Stiva separates his responsibilities as a husband from his personal desires, allowing himself to pursue pleasure elsewhere while continuing to rely on her to sustain the family.

The narrator employs Stiva to address a form of everyday moral carelessness that does not appear tragic and even fully perceptible from within. This kind of moral lightness is in line with what Morson identifies as the "ordinary" or "prosaic" nature of evil, in which wrongdoing emerges not through dramatic end but through negligence and habitual inattention, continuing because it does not register as morally significant to the subject.¹¹² Hence, Stiva's failure lies not in a single act of betrayal but in his inability to maintain moral consciousness over time. This erosion of moral awareness also defines the form of his behavior. As K. M. Newton observes, Stiva's apparent spontaneous reactions, especially his "habitual...foolish smile" when confronted by his wife, should not be accepted as neutral reflexes but as the outcome of accumulated habit and moral indifference.¹¹³ The seemingly involuntary nature of these reactions shows a character shaped by repeated choices, a pattern visible in his ongoing infidelity and in his financial irresponsibility, where he lives beyond his means and ultimately sells a portion of Dolly's dowry to cover his personal debts.

¹¹¹ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 5.

¹¹² Morson, *Anna Karenina in Our Time*, 48-50.

¹¹³ Newton, "Tolstoy's Intention in 'Anna Karenina,'" 363-364.

The Oblonsky marriage reveals a gradual depletion of its moral and emotional core while its external form remains preserved. Moreover, Stiva's conduct is socially tolerated because it does not essentially affect the outward operation of the household: the marriage is not publicly broken, the children are provided for, and daily life continues despite his infidelity. His affairs remain at the level of lust and boredom without transformational attachment, which, as Johnston-Watson argues, allows it to be considered "permissible" as long as the familial unit functions, regardless of the happiness of the family.¹¹⁴ The Oblonsky marriage becomes in this way the first instance of the larger pattern in Tolstoy's fiction, where marriage serves as a framework that exposes, but does not resolve, the slow disintegration of its own moral foundations. This lack of resolution also impacts the reader's response to Stiva's actions. His charisma and sociability provoke a sympathetic response, despite his conduct sabotaging the ethical principles of his marriage. As Turner suggests, Tolstoy's narrative method encourages readers to evaluate characters whose appealing personal qualities conflict with their moral conduct,¹¹⁵ and, in Stiva's case, this leads to a tension between liking him and judging his actions as morally wrong.

Dolly's experience takes place in an entirely different moral and psychological level but the narration does not grant her the same degree of focal access as Stiva; her consciousness appears at moments of crisis, such as the aftermath of Stiva's infidelity and her later emotional struggles surrounding marriage and domestic responsibility, rather than as a sustained point of view. This makes her seem unpleasant and harsher in the quarrel scene, especially in contrast to Stiva, whose thoughts we have already followed. When she confronts Stiva, she appears "with the letter

¹¹⁴ Errin Johnston-Watson, "The Other Love Satisfied Me: Passionate and Familial Love in *Anna Karenina*," *The Albatross* 12 (2022): 55.

¹¹⁵ C. J. G. Turner, "Psychology, Rhetoric and Morality in *Anna Karenina*: At the Bottom of Whose Heart?" *The Slavic and East European Journal* 39, no. 2 (1995): 262.

in her hand, looking at him with an expression of horror, despair, and indignation,”¹¹⁶ a reaction that strongly contrasts with his earlier lightness and self-excusing reflections. While he is concerned with having been discovered, she is confronted with a fact that changes how she understands her entire marriage. Her repeated question, “What’s this? this?,”¹¹⁷ functions as both accusation and shock as she finds it difficult to absorb that her husband committed adultery within the household itself. She continues telling herself ““that things cannot go on like this, that she must take some steps to punish him, put him to shame, avenge on him some little part at least of the suffering he had caused her.”¹¹⁸ However, her impulse toward retaliation clashes instantly with the conditions of her life: she cannot simply act on anger without considering what will follow. The narrator remarks that “she could not get out of the habit of regarding him as her husband and loving him,”¹¹⁹ and that she must also think about the practical consequences of separation: “if even here in her own house she could hardly manage to look after her five children properly, they would be still worse off where she was going with them all.”¹²⁰ Her thinking moves back and forth between emotion and necessity: between anger at Stiva’s infidelity, attachment formed through habit, and the concrete problem of how to care for her children. Her distress is therefore both a response to the collapse of trust within the marriage and a process of trying to decide what can be done under this marital crisis. Rather than coming to a clear resolution, she is forced to weigh incompatible possibilities: to remain with a husband she now sees differently, or to leave without the means to maintain her children.

By letting Stiva and Dolly explain the meaning of parenthood within their own moral frameworks, the narrative demonstrates how a marriage may endure even when the spouses

¹¹⁶ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 4.

¹¹⁷ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 4.

¹¹⁸ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 12.

¹¹⁹ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 12.

¹²⁰ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 12-13.

ascribe different values to the duties that bind them together. When Stiva comes to Dolly to talk, he pleads, “Dolly! For mercy’s sake, think of the children; they are not to blame! I am to blame, and punish me, make me expiate my fault. Anything I can do, I am ready to do anything!”¹²¹ His plea dissociates the acknowledgement of guilt from its consequences: he presents himself as the one who should be punished, while at the same time asks to be forgiven without changing his conduct that led to the betrayal. By invoking the children, he not only tries to calm her anger but also appeals to the practical concerns that might prevent her from breaking the household apart. Dolly also thinks of the children but her reasoning takes a different form. She does not use them to justify restoring the situation as it was; instead, she tries to determine what kind of future would follow from either decision. Her response enlarges the dilemma rather than resolving it: “I think of the children, and for that reason I would do anything in the world to save them, but I don’t myself know how to save them. By taking them away from their father, or by leaving them with a vicious father – yes, a vicious father...”¹²² She understands that their well-being depends not only on material stability but on the character of their father, so that neither staying or leaving offers a satisfactory solution. The children therefore do not provide a reason to forgive Stiva; they make the decision more difficult, since their future binds her to a man she now sees as “a stranger.” Stiva, in his turn, treats children, guilt, and forgiveness as a way to restore the routine as quickly as possible. His repeated statements, “My God! What have I done? Dolly! For God’s sake!... I am to blame, no words can express how much I am to blame! But, Dolly, forgive me!”¹²³ acknowledge wrongdoing without examining it, allowing him to return to the previous arrangement without addressing its root cause. The same language thus functions differently for

¹²¹ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 14.

¹²² Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 14.

¹²³ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 13-14.

each of them: for Stiva, it is a means of ending the conflict and resuming routine, whereas for Dolly, it opens a question that cannot be easily resolved.

At this point, the narrative does not follow Stiva's inner reflections but presents Dolly's words and reasoning in detail, allowing her response to be understood on its own terms. By giving her speech and thought this degree of space, the narration frames her fury as a response to a violation of the domestic order rather than a mere reaction to adultery alone. She asks him, "Tell me, after what...has happened, can we live together? Is that possible?"¹²⁴ and sharpens the question by specifying the nature of the betrayal: "after my husband, the father of my children, enters into a love affair with his own children's governess?"¹²⁵ The location of the affair matters because the governess belongs to the household that Dolly has been in charge of. In this light, the infidelity takes place within the very space for which she is responsible, turning it against her. When she calls Stiva "loathsome," "repulsive," and "a complete stranger,"¹²⁶ she is reacting to the difference between the man she believed she knew and the one exposed by his actions. The narrative allows Dolly to express her judgement fully: "Your tears mean nothing! You have never loved me; you have neither heart nor honorable feeling!"¹²⁷ By presenting her reasoning and her language in detail, the narration shows her response targets the flaw in his character and what his actions reveal about it, rather than a single act taken in isolation.

Dolly's moral life is embedded in the ongoing demands of the household, where, in Morson's terms, "meaning emerges through the ordinary,"¹²⁸ yet in her case this prosaic mode of life is inseparable from the obligation to maintain the family. Even in her most desperate moments, she cannot retreat from these responsibilities as the household continues to impose its

¹²⁴ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 14.

¹²⁵ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 14.

¹²⁶ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 14.

¹²⁷ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 14.

¹²⁸ Morson, "Marriage, Love, and Time," 361.

demands on her attention. Right after she condemns Stiva as “a stranger,” she is interrupted by the presence of her children, whose needs exist regardless of her indignation: “At that moment in the next room a child began to cry; probably it had fallen down. Darya Alexandrovna listened, and her face suddenly softened.”¹²⁹ The change in her expression redirects her attention, showing how her moral life is organized through immediate response to others rather than reflection of her own suffering. The narrative continually ties Dolly’s consciousness to caregiving or nursery, so that her emotional life remains inseparable from the needs of those around her: “Even now, in the short time she had been in the nursery, the English governess and Matrona Philimonovna had succeeded in putting several questions to her, which did not admit of delay, and which only she could answer: ‘What were the children to put on for their walk? Should they have any milk? Should not a new cook be sent for?’”¹³⁰ These interruptions exemplify Morson’s prosaic dimension of life, in which meaning is produced through attention to small, repeated actions rather than decisive events.¹³¹ For this reason, he identifies Dolly as “prosaic hero,” who lives a meaningful life that is based on continuity and daily observance of the ordinary.¹³² Because Dolly’s moral strength mirrors the book’s author values, she serves for a hidden and prosaic meaning of the novel: raising children.¹³³ At the same time, it is essential to keep in mind that Dolly’s prosaic life implies a condition for her that she must fulfill: her continuous attention is needed to prevent the disintegration of the whole household, making the maintenance of everyday life both her responsibility and her constraint.

In these everyday domestic scenes, maintenance itself acquires an ethical meaning. The household continues to function because Dolly keeps thinking, planning, and acting even when

¹²⁹ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 15.

¹³⁰ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 16.

¹³¹ Morson, “Marriage, Love, and Time,” 361.

¹³² Morson, *Anna Karenina in Our Time*, 38-39.

¹³³ Morson, *Anna Karenina in Our Time*, 39-40.

this kind of labor brings her no personal consolation. Her domestic labor includes not only physical care but memory and anticipation: she remembers schedules, predicts needs, and prevents disorder prior to its manifestation. The narrative shows that Stiva takes the advantages from this ongoing work without taking part in it, and after the crisis he continues his affairs and daily routines as before. He can leave the house, dine out, attend to his affairs, and resume a relatively normal routine because Dolly manages the crises his behaviour creates. Therefore, Stiva and Dolly's marriage depends on an uneven distribution of attention: her constant vigilance sustains the household, while his moral carelessness does not disrupt its functioning. By presenting her work in detail, the narrative demonstrates how the stability of the family relies on labor that receives minimal praise and even less acknowledgement. Dolly's patience gained a significance exactly because it is exercised in ordinary time through clothing, meals, classes, and tears rather than through dramatic moments. The endurance that prevents the fall of a household, in Tolstoy's moral universe, has an importance as great as, and perhaps greater than, bigger passions that govern more melodramatic plots of the novel. At the same time, her endurance ties her to a situation that does not change. Her decision to remain with Stiva does not resolve the problem but allows it to persist in its existing form: he continues his affairs and his financial irresponsibility places the future of their children at risk. The same attentiveness that preserves the household also binds Dolly to a marriage in which she must accept the consequences of Stiva's behaviour.

Anna and Karenin

The marriage of Anna Arkadyevna and Alexey Alexandrovitch Karenin in *Anna Karenina* is presented as a union structured by two incompatible ways of understanding what marriage is.

They share a household, a child, and a name, yet they cannot speak openly to one another about their thoughts or feelings. In contrast to Stiva and Dolly's marriage, which is marked by visible conflict, Anna and Karenin's relationship initially appears composed and orderly but it does so because they avoid direct conversation about their dissatisfaction, leaving the conflict unspoken. From the beginning, their cohabitation or co-existence is organized through external arrangements (e.g., official visits, regulated conversation, and clearly defined roles) to such an extent that marriage functions as a stable social structure with very little room for emotional exchange. Moreover, whereas Stiva and Dolly are largely revealed through their own speech and thought, Anna and Karenin are often understood through how they appear to others and through the social settings they inhabit, so that their marriage is mediated and refracted through multiple perspectives. As Morson argues, the narrative often encourages readers to see that what appears as description is in fact shaped by a character's perception; in Anna's case, she gradually "schools herself" into misperceiving Karenin, mistaking her trained impressions for objective reality.¹³⁴ Morson's distinction between perception and narration is central to understanding Anna and Karenin's marriage, since it shows that its apparent emotional emptiness is produced through Anna's way of seeing. This section argues that their marriage is shaped from the outset by a mismatch between Karenin's commitment to maintaining order, routine, and social form, and Anna's growing awareness that she is trapped in respectable but loveless marriage. This mismatch impacts their relationship long before its visible collapse, making their eventual separation the outcome of a conflict already present in the form of their everyday life.

Karenin understands marriage in practical and formal terms: it secures his position, fulfills his religious duty, and maintains order within the household. The "paper world"¹³⁵ of

¹³⁴ Morson, *Anna Karenina in Our Time*, 86-87.

¹³⁵ Greene, "Women, Character, and Society," 108.

bureaucracy that Tolstoy depicts, which Greene associates with Karenin's realm, helps explain why he approaches marital crisis as a matter of form, rule, and procedure. For him, the value of marriage is in continuity, propriety, and adherence to established standards. Anna, by contrast, comes to evaluate through her experience of it. At first, she keeps to the routines of the household, directing her attention toward her child, but she gradually realizes that Karenin does not respond to her feelings, that their exchanges remain formal, and that their life together lacks any sense of closeness. The divergence becomes evident through their day-to-day interactions, which remain procedural and hardly ever develop into exchanges in which either speaks openly about inner life. Unlike the Oblonsky marriage, where both spouses recognize the same moral framework even as one fails to uphold it, Anna and Karenin do not share a common understanding of what marriage requires. Dolly stays faithful and keeps the household running, while Stiva has affairs and still expects her to manage everything at home despite his conduct. In Anna and Karenin's case, however, the conflict appears from the beginning of the marriage itself: Anna and Karenin value marriage according to different principles. For Anna, marriage depends on emotional closeness and personal feeling, whereas Karenin treats it as a structure defined by duty and order.

The narrative delays the introduction of Karenin's background and the early history of his marriage, so that the reader first sees him as a figure defined by form, propriety, and administrative logic. Only after the collapse of his marriage does the narrative return to his past, showing how his life has been formed by loss and institutional discipline. Orphaned young, raised within bureaucratic structures, and absorbed early into state service, Karenin has been formed within systems that regulate behaviour but do not cultivate intimacy. The death of his only brother, the absence of friendship, and the fact that his relationships were limited to "clearly

defined channels,”¹³⁶ explain why, in the face of marital crisis, he reacts with order and principle rather than emotional confrontation. In this regard, the narrative illustrates what Morson refers to as Tolstoy’s preoccupation with “tiny, tiny alterations” in consciousness, as the gradual disclosure of Karenin’s loneliness and personal history changes the reader’s perception of him from a cold bureaucratic figure to a man capable of suffering.¹³⁷ For much of the novel, Karenin is presented from the outside, but over halfway through the narrative we are given access to his emotional state, revealing a man “utterly alone in his sorrow,”¹³⁸ with “not a human being to whom he could express what he was feeling, who would feel for him, not as a high official, not as a member of society, but simply as a suffering man.”¹³⁹ This late disclosure asks the reader to reconsider what had earlier been understood as emotional coldness.

The delayed understanding of Karenin’s character extends to his marriage. During the narration of Karenin’s background, the novel presents their union as a decision shaped by pressure and circumstance: “Anna’s aunt, a wealthy provincial lady...had succeeded in putting him in such a position that he had either to declare himself or to leave the town.”¹⁴⁰ Karenin proposes and then “concentrated on his betrothed and his wife all the feeling of which he was capable,”¹⁴¹ directing his attachment through the same discipline that governs the rest of his life. Anna, by contrast, enters the novel already defined by her social roles, first as Stiva’s sister and then Karenin’s wife, while the narrative gives very little account of her childhood or upbringing. We are told very little about Anna’s parents, early emotional life, or the experiences that shaped her character, apart from brief details such as her upbringing under her aunt’s care; instead, she is introduced in the novel as a well-educated and charming member of the Russian aristocracy,

¹³⁶ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 19: 77-78.

¹³⁷ Morson, *Anna Karenina in Our Time*, 77-78.

¹³⁸ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 19: 76-77.

¹³⁹ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 19: 77.

¹⁴⁰ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 19: 77.

¹⁴¹ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 19: 77.

moving within the highest circles of St. Petersburg society through her marriage to Karenin, who is twenty years older than she is. Unlike Levin or Kitty, whose development the novel traces across multiple stages of experience, Anna enters the narrative with much of her character already formed and with relatively little account of her past that formed her.

By reserving Karenin's background information until Anna's total renunciation, the narrator creates a change in the reader's alignment: Karenin's suffering becomes not only visible but also hard to dismiss, making the reader sympathize with a man whose emotional life has been shaped by bureaucratic discipline, isolation, and habit. The sympathy for Karenin comes not from new events but from a reordering of the knowledge, forcing the reader to revise an earlier, incomplete interpretation, just as Anna herself begins to see Karenin differently. Her definition of Karenin as an "official machine"¹⁴² now seems partial and even unfair, since it fails to account for the circumstances that have shaped him. In the meantime, the narrative does not simply reverse its sympathies or openly condemn Anna. Rather, it places her rejection alongside Karenin's vulnerability, making her decision more difficult to judge. The marriage therefore cannot be reduced to the consequences of infidelity alone but must be understood as a bond that was uneven from the beginning, maintained by duty on one side and strained by the absence of emotional reciprocity on the other.

The re-evaluation of Karenin is prepared by the way the narrative initially introduces him. The character of Karenin is mediated by the perceptions and judgements of others, situating him as a public figure before he becomes an intimate one. At the beginning of the novel, the narration is closely aligned with Stiva, and Karenin is first mentioned through his perspective: Stiva "occupied the honorable and lucrative position of president of one of the government boards at Moscow. This post he had received through his sister Anna's husband, Alexey Alexandrovitch

¹⁴² Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 379.

Karenin, who held one of the most important positions in the ministry to whose department the Moscow office belonged.”¹⁴³ Karenin thus enters the novel, from Stiva’s perspective, as an institutional power, a carrier of progress, a man whose authority stretches beyond the home into state structures. His identity is first defined through rank and influence rather than personality, a point which also echoed in the dialogue between Stiva and Vronsky: “But Alexey Alexandrovitch, my celebrated brother-in-law, you surely must know. All the world knows him.”¹⁴⁴ Vronsky responds, “I know him by reputation and by sight. I know that he’s clever, learned, religious somewhat...But you know that’s not...not in my line.”¹⁴⁵ These exchanges establish Karenin as a figure who is widely recognized yet not personally known. Even Vronsky, who will later become central to the breakdown of his marriage, encounters him first as a type: “clever,” “learned,” “religious somewhat.” The fact that Vronsky can identify him in these terms without any personal acquaintance shows that Karenin is publicly legible, his qualities visible as part of his social identity rather than discovered through intimacy. In other words, Karenin is known through reputation, position, and outward markers, not through emotional or personal connection.

The early St. Petersburg scenes reveal the marriage of Anna and Karenin as a union maintained by continuity and social authority, yet already marked by tension that precedes any explicit betrayal. The narrative discloses their emotionally restrained relationship through shifts in perception as opposed to open confrontation. As Anna tells herself on the train after the ball with Vronsky, “Thank God! Tomorrow I shall see Seryozha and Alexey Alexandrovitch, and my life will go on in the old way, all nice and as usual.”¹⁴⁶ It is evident that Anna conceptualizes her

¹⁴³ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 16-17.

¹⁴⁴ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 63.

¹⁴⁵ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 63.

¹⁴⁶ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 106.

marriage as repetition; the past is no different than the future, and the phrase “old way” refers to a pattern that resumes automatically. In her view, marriage is not conceived as a dynamic exchange but as a fixed arrangement into which one re-enters. When Anna sees Karenin, her attention is drawn to his “unpleasant” physical feature, “Oh, mercy! Why do his ears look like that?”¹⁴⁷ and the narrative continues with his “rigid and imposing figure,” his “habitual sarcastic smile,” and his “big, tired eyes.”¹⁴⁸ As she looks at him in this way, a familiar unease returns, a “feeling of dissatisfaction with herself... That feeling was an intimate, familiar feeling, like a consciousness of hypocrisy, which she experienced in her relations with her husband.”¹⁴⁹ The feeling is not new; it is one she already knows from her life with him. As Morson argues, perception in the novel is not passive, since “looking” and “paying attention” are themselves actions, and “the more she directs her attention to what she does not like, and the more she ascribes lack of feeling to Karenin, the more she comes to see him that way automatically.”¹⁵⁰ Anna’s attention to what is unpleasant in Karenin does not just reflect her dissatisfaction but strengthens it as her way of looking and her feelings begin to shape one another.

In the same scene at the railway station at St. Petersburg, Vronsky’s perspective shows Karenin from the outside. He observes Karenin “calmly take her arm with a sense of property,”¹⁵¹ a gesture that turns the marriage into a visible claim over Anna. Karenin’s “Petersburg face” and “severely self-confident figure”¹⁵² represent authority in outward form, so that his position is evident in his posture and manner. Vronsky’s reaction, comparing his encounter to “a thirsty man finding a spring muddied by a dog, a sheep, or a pig,”¹⁵³ shows that he understands Anna’s

¹⁴⁷ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 110.

¹⁴⁸ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 110.

¹⁴⁹ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 110.

¹⁵⁰ Morson, *Anna Karenina in Our Time*, 84.

¹⁵¹ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 112.

¹⁵² Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 112.

¹⁵³ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 112.

marriage as both an obstacle that limits his access to Anna and something that spoils and contaminates what he desires. His conclusion, based on “the signs of slight reserve with which she spoke to her husband,”¹⁵⁴ that “she does not love him and cannot love him,”¹⁵⁵ treats that restraint as a fixed feature of her marriage rather than a passing moment. Vronsky does not judge Karenin as undeserving but experiences him as the wrong kind of man for Anna. Whether his judgement is right or wrong, he reads Anna’s marriage in terms of his own desire and sees Karenin as an obstacle.

Karenin lives his marriage as he runs his ministry, and he does so through punctuality, hierarchy, and procedure. After a ministerial meeting, he does not go to Anna but to his study, and “as often happened, he had not time to come in to her,”¹⁵⁶ instead, he receives petitioners and signs papers. The phrase “as often happened” implies that this is his regular routine and his time with Anna is what drops out when his schedule is full. Dinner is served at a fixed hour, “before the bronze Peter the First clock had struck the fifth stroke,”¹⁵⁷ and the evening proceeds according to that time. He then appears in “white tie and evening coat with two stars,”¹⁵⁸ already prepared for what follows after dinner, so that the movement from one part of the day to the next continues without interruption. The narrative notes that “Every minute of Alexey Alexandrovitch’s life was portioned out and occupied,”¹⁵⁹ and his motto, “Unhasting and unresting,”¹⁶⁰ describes a way of living in which nothing is left unplanned or uncertain. Karenin’s marriage continues in the same way, fitting into his daily order without altering it. When he tells Anna, “Yes, my solitude is over. You wouldn’t believe how uncomfortable (he laid stress on the

¹⁵⁴ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 112.

¹⁵⁵ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 112.

¹⁵⁶ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 116.

¹⁵⁷ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 116.

¹⁵⁸ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 116.

¹⁵⁹ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 116.

¹⁶⁰ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 116.

word *uncomfortable*), it is to dine alone,”¹⁶¹ implying that solitude troubles him primarily because it disrupts the usual order of his evening routine.

Moreover, Dolly’s and Kitty’s perception further intensifies the distance between Karenin’s public authority and his private domestic reserve. Although Dolly can say of Anna, “I know nothing of her except the very best, and I have seen nothing but kindness and affection from her towards myself,”¹⁶² she admits “she did not like their household itself; there was something artificial in the whole framework of their family life.”¹⁶³ The artificiality that Dolly perceives does not contradict Karenin’s public reputation but complicates it. Because he approaches life with a bureaucratic commitment to order and structure, his household appears to be arranged, constructed, and perhaps even curated to suit his administrative temperament. The lack of visible intimacy in the marriage is also shown through Kitty’s thoughts: “How I should like to know all her [Anna’s] love story! thought Kitty, recalling the unromantic appearance of Alexey Alexandrovitch.”¹⁶⁴ These perceptions of official prestige, intellectual seriousness, public religiosity, domestic artificiality, and absence of visible passion build up Karenin as an external figure, known through his reputation and impression. The reader, like the other characters, first encounters Karenin as he appears to others, and only much later gains access to his mind and his relationship with Anna. At this stage of the novel, Karenin is presented from the outside, and his external image is later complicated for the reader as the narrative turns to his background, revealing his loneliness and inability to express his feelings.

Karenin meets the possibility of Anna’s attachment to another man by trying to keep it within his usual way of thinking: writing out his arguments and arranging them step by step. At

¹⁶¹ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 116.

¹⁶² Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 71.

¹⁶³ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 71.

¹⁶⁴ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 78.

first, he finds “nothing striking or improper in the fact that his wife was sitting with Vronsky at a table apart, in eager conversation with him about something,”¹⁶⁵ until he reconsiders the situation when he looks at it through the eyes of others, thinking about how they will appear, as if he were allowing what is happening between Anna and Vronsky. When the thought becomes inevitable, he finds himself as if “standing face to face with something illogical and irrational,”¹⁶⁶ and the image of the broken bridge, “That chasm was life itself, the bridge that artificial life in which Alexey Alexandrovitch had lived,”¹⁶⁷ demonstrates that what is happening does not fit the way he has been living. Karenin responds trying to bring it back under control: pacing the rooms, his tells himself, “Yes, this I must decide and put a stop to... What has occurred? Nothing,”¹⁶⁸ reducing what has happened to an issue he can deal with. He then sets aside what he cannot handle, saying that “the question of her feelings, of what has passed and may be passing in her soul, that’s not my affair; that’s the affair of her conscience,”¹⁶⁹ and turns to what he can state and arrange. He defines himself “as the head of the family,”¹⁷⁰ brings forward public opinion, religion, and their son, and prepares what he will say “as clearly and distinctly in his head as a ministerial report.”¹⁷¹ In doing so, he treats his marriage as a matter of duty and position he can control, as though it were, in Manning’s terms, “an empty form, one in name only,”¹⁷² in which the communication between husband and wife is replaced by the maintenance of roles.

The precarious harmony of the Karenin marriage collapses after the steeplechase, when Anna proves unable to maintain the dishonest facade between outward propriety and inner feelings that had long defined their relationship. Up to this point, their union survived on silence,

¹⁶⁵ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 150.

¹⁶⁶ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 150.

¹⁶⁷ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 151.

¹⁶⁸ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 151.

¹⁶⁹ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 152.

¹⁷⁰ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 152.

¹⁷¹ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 152.

¹⁷² Clarence Augustus Manning, “Tolstoy and *Anna Karenina*,” *PMLA* 42, no. 2 (1927): 511.

performance, and the avoidance of direct emotional confrontation. It is the shock of the race, during which she could not hide her distress over Vronsky's safety in front of her husband, that breaks that pattern, and Anna, who cannot go back to the "old way," confesses to Karenin: "I hear you, but I am thinking of him. I love him, I am his mistress; I can't bear you; I'm afraid of you, and I hate you.... You can do what you like to me."¹⁷³ Her confession replaces the habitual restraint of their marriage with an unfiltered articulation of emotion, making further coexistence within the same terms impossible. Karenin's response, nevertheless, is consistent with the principles that have always guided his understanding of marriage. Instead of responding to the emotional truth of her confession, he simplifies it into an issue of external order: "I expect a strict observance of the external forms of propriety till such time... as I may take measures to secure my honor and communicate them to you."¹⁷⁴ His reaction shows that he cares less about the fact that she, his wife, is in love with another man than about the risk of public scandal and the disruption of his household's appearance. By insisting that she continue to appear as his wife in public, he keeps the marriage in place as a set of forms even after she has rejected it. As Gorodetzky notes, Anna's decisive failure does not happen when she confesses but later, when Karenin forgives her and she nevertheless chooses to leave him for Vronsky.¹⁷⁵ From this point on, they no longer stand in the same relation to their marriage: Karenin wants to continue it as before, while Anna cannot.

The dialogue between Anna and Vronsky about Karenin changes the question of adultery into a judgment on the nature of Anna's marriage. Karenin's letter has already defined that marriage as a bond that cannot be broken despite her confession, tied by religious obligation, social form, and the preservation of the family. When Anna asks Vronsky about his accidental

¹⁷³ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 224.

¹⁷⁴ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 224.

¹⁷⁵ Nadezhda Gorodetzky, "Anna Karenina," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 24, no. 63, (1946), 123.

encounter with her husband on the doorway of the Karenin household, her voice is “unnatural and jarring,”¹⁷⁶ and she immediately imitates “the very expression with which Alexey Alexandrovitch had bowed.”¹⁷⁷ Anna does not attempt to interpret her husband’s thoughts, but only to reproduce his outward form as though his identity were exhausted by manners and posture. In her view, Karenin remains a surface with a set of manners that remain unchanged even after his wife’s declaration of love for another man. Vronsky, on the other hand, approaches the situation with a code of personal honor that requires visible response; his confusion, “If after your avowal to him at your country house he had broken with you, if he had called me out – but this I can’t understand,”¹⁷⁸ reflects the failure of Karenin’s behaviour to fit into the script of any recognizable masculine response. Anna does not see restraint or moral strength in Karenin’s conduct; she perceives the absence of feeling altogether. “He’s perfectly satisfied,”¹⁷⁹ she says, rejecting even the possibility of him suffering. For Anna, the problem is not that he endures her adultery and encounters his wife’s lover in his own house, but that he can endure them at all.

Anna’s judgement does not stop at this perception but intensifies into a redefinition of who Karenin is. “He’s not a man, not a human being – he’s a doll! ...Oh, if I’d been in his place, I’d long ago have killed, have torn to pieces a wife like me...He’s not a man, he’s an official machine,”¹⁸⁰ she says, no longer describing his behavior but denying him emotional and human status. She not only refuses him emotional depth but masculinity as well. In her view, to be a “man” is to feel, react and assert oneself within intimate relations, and her judgment appeals to a model of masculine honor grounded in passion, jealousy, and even violence. The fact that Karenin does not reply in that way, his continued politeness, “Anna, *ma chère*,”¹⁸¹ tells her that it

¹⁷⁶ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 379.

¹⁷⁷ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 379.

¹⁷⁸ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 379.

¹⁷⁹ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 379.

¹⁸⁰ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 379.

¹⁸¹ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 379.

is not a matter of restraint but that he does not act at all. In this respect, Anna takes Karenin's composure as emasculation: he is not a husband defending his marriage, he is an administrator maintaining a structure. Labeling him as a "doll" and an "official machine," Anna reduces Karenin's identity to functionality and performance, depriving him of interiority, agency, and gendered presence. Therefore, Anna presents Karenin less as a husband she does not love but as a figure incapable of the emotional and bodily logic by which she understands marriage itself.

Anna and Vronsky

If Oblonsky marriage fails within a shared moral code and Karenin marriage disintegrates because Anna and her husband cannot agree on what makes marriage legitimate at all, then Anna and Vronsky's relationship can be seen as a more radical problem: a union attempting to function as marriage outside the institutional, legal, and moral structures that conventionally sustain it. Their relationship develops beyond a passing affair into a form of quasi-marriage, since they live together as a couple, travel, form a household, and raise a child. Yet unlike traditional marriage, their union rests almost entirely on mutual affection. Fidelity, sacrifice and domestic responsibility are not explicitly rejected but they are no longer anchored to law, religion or communal recognition and instead depend on the continued intensity of love itself.

In his relationship with Anna, Vronsky is not portrayed as a villain, seducer, or cynical libertine but as an exceptionally attractive and socially accomplished man who is ill-suited for constancy and depth. As Jackson notes, Vronsky's composure and self-control mask a certain emotional "shallowness": even during the novel's first railway accident scene, he remains calm and simply does what Anna asks of him, without sharing either her or Stiva's depth of emotional

response.¹⁸² His emotional restraint is produced by the aristocratic social culture in which Vronsky has been formed. At the beginning of the novel, Stiva describes Vronsky to Levin as “one of the finest specimens of the gilded youth of Petersburg”: “fearfully rich, handsome, great connections, an aide-de-camp, and with all that a very nice, good-natured fellow...he’s a cultivated man, too, and very intelligent; he’s a man who’ll make his mark.”¹⁸³ His description places Vronsky in a social economy of visibility, success and effortless charm rather than emotional seriousness or lasting commitment. He appears as a final product of aristocratic refinement, a “specimen,” valued for how naturally he moves within a world of status, display, and admiration. Even his intelligence is introduced less as moral depth than as polish and cultivated social perception. The narrative later reveals that Vronsky “had never had a real home,”¹⁸⁴ barely knew his own father, and was raised by a mother whose “many love affairs notorious in the whole fashionable world.”¹⁸⁵ Stable domestic life therefore never serves as a model for his adult attachments.

Furthermore, at the beginning of the novel, marriage appears to Vronsky “as something alien, repellant, and, above all, ridiculous,”¹⁸⁶ because the identity of a husband belongs to a way of life that is incompatible with the habits of freedom, mobility, and emotional detachment that have formed his personality. In this regard, although Karenin and Vronsky appear as opposites, Kuzmic observes that the novel contrasts Karenin’s “disembodied” intellectualism with Vronsky’s excessive physicality, organizing the two men through a division between mind (“the man of the spirit or faith”) and body (“the man of the flesh”).¹⁸⁷ As a result, Anna’s switch from

¹⁸² Robert Louis Jackson, “Chance and Design: Anna Karenina’s First Meeting with Vronsky,” in *Close Encounters: Essays on Russian Literature* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013), 86-87.

¹⁸³ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 43.

¹⁸⁴ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 61.

¹⁸⁵ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 61.

¹⁸⁶ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 62.

¹⁸⁷ Kuzmic, “The Mind, the Body, and the Love Triangle,” 3.

one relationship to the other does not resolve the contradictions of either marriage but merely shifts between two incomplete forms of masculine authority. The relationship with Vronsky therefore cannot provide a stable alternative to the marriage Anna rejects.

The tragedy of Anna and Vronsky's quasi-marriage is not that he stops loving her but that he has never been shaped to bear the moral weight of becoming someone's entire world. The pattern has already been observed in his previous treatment of Kitty. As her attachment to him intensifies, he experiences her growing dependence as a confirmation of his own desirability: "he felt that she was becoming more and more dependent upon him, and the more he felt this, the better he liked it, and the tenderer was his feeling for her."¹⁸⁸ Her dependence brings emotional pleasure to him but it does not lead him to consider what responsibility such attachment might impose. The narrative notes that he "did not know that his mode of behavior in relation to Kitty had a definite character, that it is courting young girls with no intention of marriage,"¹⁸⁹ exposing a moral perspective limited to the immediacy of feeling and admiration. Vronsky enjoys awakening emotional attachment in others yet he does not recognize how to sustain the responsibilities that follow from it.

At the level of individual motivation, Anna's attraction to Vronsky is often presented as involuntary and overwhelming, and this emphasis does not eliminate her responsibility but rather relocates it to how she responds to that feeling over time. The narrator foreshadows the involuntary nature of Anna's spontaneous actions, gestures, and emotional responses, which appear to exceed her conscious control and suggest inevitability as the absence of an internal counterforce.¹⁹⁰ The issue, as Newton puts it, is not that Anna experiences desire but that "her

¹⁸⁸ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 61.

¹⁸⁹ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 61.

¹⁹⁰ Newton, "Tolstoy's Intention in 'Anna Karenina,'" 363-365.

commitment to marriage is not strong enough to resist impulses at variance with it,"¹⁹¹ shifting the focus from the presence of feeling to the capacity to maintain resistance. This account both determines the immediate source of instability and points beyond individual will to the conditions that make such resistance possible. According to Manning, Anna's transgression differs from Stiva and Betsy's casual affairs, in that she is unable to treat her attachment as a passing indulgence but experiences it as a total reorientation of her life.¹⁹² Her relationship with Vronsky therefore takes on demands that extend beyond feeling itself: it must replace the stability of marriage, her social position, and her identity as a wife and mother, placing a burden on the union that it cannot sustain. Those incompatible roles result in fragmentation and reflect a situation in which no single role can be fully maintained without undermining the others, exposing the limits of a relationship that depends entirely on emotional intensity without the support of shared structures. As a result, the union becomes unstable, leading to tension, jealousy, and eventual disintegration. This instability, however, is also structural. Because of the lack of a stable domestic framework, as Gorodetzky notes, the relationship between Anna and Vronsky unfolds in borrowed or transitional spaces (e.g., railway settings, a stranger's garden, socially detached locations) rather than within a shared home.¹⁹³ Their cohabitation, without a fixed domestic center, remains provisional, so that their relationship never consolidates into a stable form of shared life.

When emotional intensity continues to function as self-confirmation rather than as the recognition of obligation, Vronsky's attachment to Anna grows but does not mature. During the early stage of their affair, when Vronsky follows Anna to the railway station through the

¹⁹¹ Newton, "Tolstoy's Intention in 'Anna Karenina,'" 365.

¹⁹² Manning, "Tolstoy and *Anna Karenina*," 513.

¹⁹³ Gorodetzky, "Anna Karenina," 123-124.

snowstorm, he tells her, “You know that I have come to be where you are...I can’t help it.”¹⁹⁴ the language of inevitability substitutes the language of decision, heightening the intensity of his passion without articulating the question of future responsibility. In Morson’s terms, Anna and Vronsky begin to follow a “romantic script” in which passion itself appears sufficient to justify and sustain the relationship. As Anna tells Vronsky, “Our life, if it *could* be stronger, will be strengthened because there is something terrible in it,”¹⁹⁵ their relationship derives its force from emotional exclusivity and transgression. Even at the very beginning of their attachment, before any shared domestic life exists between them, Vronsky experiences Anna as the total concentration of his emotional world: “all his forces, hitherto dissipated, wasted, were centered on one thing, and bent with fearful energy on one blissful goal,”¹⁹⁶ so that “all the happiness of his life, the only meaning in life for him, now lay in seeing and hearing her.”¹⁹⁷ His language focuses entirely on immediate emotional presence, on “seeing and hearing.” Thus, even at the height of his devotion, “what would come of it all he did not know, he did not even think,”¹⁹⁸ showing Vronsky’s outright indifference to considering what his infatuated confession to married woman and their potential attachment might eventually require of him in the future.

The consequences that Vronsky initially refuses to consider become central after the affair is consummated. By refusing to describe the sexual act explicitly and instead presenting its aftermath as a metaphorical murder, the narrative changes the meaning of consummation from sensual gratification into that of irreversible destruction, thereby establishing the logic governing Anna and Vronsky’s later relationship. The text does not narrate their first sexual intercourse directly; instead, the narrative shifts to Vronsky’s stunned consciousness, in which he feels “what

¹⁹⁴ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 109.

¹⁹⁵ Morson, “Marriage, Love, and Time,” 366.

¹⁹⁶ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 111.

¹⁹⁷ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 111.

¹⁹⁸ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 111.

a murderer must feel, when he sees the body he has robbed of life.”¹⁹⁹ The “body” signifies both Anna’s physical body and the destruction of her former identity as wife and mother, so that what has happened appears irrevocable from the very beginning. As Kuzmic notes, in *Anna Karenina* “adulterous sex is likened to murder,”²⁰⁰ so that desire is framed not as fulfillment but as an act inseparable from destruction. The analogy shifts immediately from passion to consequence, from erotic union to the necessity of living with the irreversible destruction it has produced: “in spite of all the murderer’s horror before the body of his victim, he must hack it to pieces, hide the body, must use what he has gained by his murder.”²⁰¹ Through this refusal of erotic description and its concentration on psychological devastation, “Shame at their spiritual nakedness crushed her and infected him,”²⁰² the novel frames the affair as the event that shatters Anna’s previous social and moral existence, leaving the passion itself burdened with the task of justifying the life that has been destroyed for its sake.

By leaving Karenin, Anna is not simply choosing another man but abandoning her position within marriage, family life, and St. Petersburg society, where she had lived as Karenin’s wife and Seryozha’s mother. As she tells Vronsky, “All is over. I have nothing but you. Remember that,”²⁰³ the relationship becomes her only remaining source of meaning and attachment. Anna increasingly treats emotional truth as more real than the legal marriage she has left behind, so that the relationship itself must replace the social, moral, and institutional bonds it has broken. However, as Morson observes, “The last thing Anna wanted is prosaic marriage.”²⁰⁴ Nevertheless, Anna’s rejection of prosaic marriage does not appear fully formed from the beginning. In other words, her rejection of prosaic marriage is shown through a series of

¹⁹⁹ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 157-158.

²⁰⁰ Kuzmic, “The Mind, the Body, and the Love Triangle,” 12.

²⁰¹ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 158.

²⁰² Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 158.

²⁰³ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 158.

²⁰⁴ Morson, “Marriage, Love, and Time,” 366.

emotional and moral crises. After Karenin's forgiveness following childbirth, Anna is torn between shame, guilt, and confusion, unable to either return to her former marriage or to settle into a new one. As the novel progresses, however, Vronsky begins to desire the ordinary forms of domestic stability: Anna's legal divorce, the possibility of making their daughter (Annie) legally his, and a more settled social existence. Anna, by contrast, does not want to be "anything but a mistress"²⁰⁵ because she experiences Vronsky's movement toward ordinary domestic life as a weakening of the exclusive intensity through which she has justified the sacrifice of her marriage, her son, social position, and former identity. Their relationship begins to fail when Vronsky starts becoming prosaic in a way Anna cannot accept, and the fear that his love is becoming ordinary and divided eventually contributes to her emotional collapse and suicide.

Levin and Kitty

Unlike the novel's other marriages, which remain fixed as social, bureaucratic, or passionate arrangements, the relationship between Konstantin Levin and Kitty Shcherbatskaya develops through error, separation, self-exploration, and renewed understanding. Their marriage therefore is not presented as an effortless harmony existing from the beginning but as a process of continual moral and emotional adjustment through which both spouses learn to abandon idealized expectations and accommodate themselves to the ordinary realities of shared life. The narrative traces Levin and Kitty's movement from youthful romantic illusion toward a more grounded conception of intimacy founded on mutual responsibility, forgiveness, and participation in the daily routines of domestic existence. As Morson argues, the novel locates the meaning of family life in the "small joys" of ordinary experience that "pass unnoticed, like gold

²⁰⁵ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 19: 343.

in sand.”²⁰⁶ Rather than collapsing under emotional disappointment, conflicting expectations, or the pressures of domestic life, Levin and Kitty’s union gradually acquires stability through the spouses’ willingness to negotiate misunderstanding, jealousy, sexuality, household responsibility, and parenthood without allowing these tensions to become destructive. This section therefore argues that Levin and Kitty’s marriage becomes the only stable and mutually intelligible union in *Anna Karenina* because both spouses learn to replace romantic idealization with a shared commitment to the ordinary labor, compromise, and mutual obligations through which prosaic happiness emerges.

The distinctiveness of Levin’s and Kitty’s relationship first appears in Levin’s lack of interest in the masculine social world that shapes characters such as Stiva and Vronsky. As Blake argues, Tolstoy presents the novel’s male social sphere as structured through homosocial competition, display, and the continual assertion of masculine superiority, a world in which women function as markers of status within “compete/control hierarchy.”²⁰⁷ Unlike Stiva and Vronsky, who seek refuge from domestic obligations in male camaraderie, military culture, drinking, political gatherings, and bachelor sociability, Levin is drawn toward the family-centered life of the Shcherbatsky household, where everyday domestic relations matter more to him than masculine competition and social display.²⁰⁸ Even before his marriage, his attachment to Kitty weakens his participation in masculine rivalry itself: instead of treating Vronsky as a competitor to be defeated, Levin responds to Kitty’s preference with humiliation and self-withdrawal because he sees himself as Kitty’s suitor, not a member of the competition for “male power.”²⁰⁹ Blake therefore suggests that Levin’s refusal to treat other men as rivals and

²⁰⁶ Morson, “Marriage, Love, and Time,” 361-362.

²⁰⁷ Elizabeth Blake, “Toward a Happy Marriage: Transcending Gendered Social Roles in *Anna Karenina*,” *Studies in Slavic Culture* (2001): 94-95.

²⁰⁸ Blake, “Toward a Happy Marriage,” 100-102.

²⁰⁹ Blake, “Toward a Happy Marriage,” 95-99.

to measure himself through competition allows him to move beyond the forms of masculine behaviour shaping the novel's other relationships.²¹⁰ This movement toward domestic life, however, does not produce immediate harmony or dissolve the tensions within marriage itself. Levin and Kitty's relationship remains marked by wounded pride, misunderstanding, jealousy, sexual anxiety, and unequal expectations, especially in its early stages. Their marriage becomes stable gradually because both spouses learn to confront these tensions within their shared lives rather than escaping into romantic fantasy, masculine self-assertion, or emotional withdrawal.

Levin's initial vision of marriage is formed around an idealized image of Kitty that allows little space for her independent feelings, and this idealization becomes the first obstacle that their relationship has to handle in the novel. In Part 1, Levin comes to Moscow with a single purpose that he struggles even to articulate; when Stiva asks why he has come, "Levin blushed, and was furious with himself for blushing, because he could not answer, "I have come to make your sister-in-law an offer," though that was precisely what he had come for."²¹¹ The intensity of Levin's embarrassment underscores the level of seriousness with which he approaches the prospect of marriage. His attraction to Kitty is connected with his long-standing attachment to the world embodied by her family. As Johnston-Watson argues, Levin prioritizes the idea of family even before the choice of a wife, imagining "a family first and then a woman who would give him the family."²¹² The narrative tells us that Levin had once been "in love with the Shcherbatsky household...the family...especially with the feminine half of the household,"²¹³ and that he was drawn to it because of the harmony and cultivated domesticity he felt there. Having lost his parents at a young age and spent most of his life without a close family circle,

²¹⁰ Blake, "Toward a Happy Marriage," 105-106.

²¹¹ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 24.

²¹² Johnston-Watson, "The Other Love Satisfied Me," 56.

²¹³ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 24.

Levin finds in the Shcherbatskys a form of domestic stability that seems complete and self-sustaining.

Levin does not fall in love with Kitty per se;²¹⁴ consequently, he imagines marriage to her as entry into the harmonious domestic world embodied by the Shcherbatsky family he has long idealized. He admits that her refusal “will be awful for me, and for her too,”²¹⁵ because the proposal carries for him a significance beyond private emotional attachment. Observing Levin’s agitation, Stiva recognizes the extent to which Kitty has been removed in his imagination above ordinary social reality, reflecting that for Levin “all the girls in the world except her”²¹⁶ belong to one category marked by ordinary human weaknesses, whereas Kitty alone appears “higher than all humanity.”²¹⁷ The contrast reveals less Kitty’s actual character than Levin’s tendency to elevate her into the symbolic center of the domestic ideal he associates with her family. Such idealization puts tremendous pressure on the proposal itself since the union he envisions is supposed to solve his emotional and existential uncertainty. As Morson observes, the novel questions the idea that life is determined by singular “turning points,” yet Levin initially treats the proposal in exactly such terms. Kitty’s rejection therefore becomes transformative not because it seals his fate but because her refusal forces him to reconsider the idealized expectations he had attached both to Kitty and to marriage itself.

When Levin first proposes to her, Kitty cannot perceive Levin as a romantic figure because his long familiarity makes him appear safe, ordinary, and almost brother-like in comparison to

²¹⁴ “In his student days he had all but been in love with the eldest, Dolly, but she was soon married to Oblonsky. Then he began being in love with the second. He felt, as it were, that he had to be in love with one of the sisters, only he could not quite make out which. But Natalia, too, had hardly made her appearance in the world when she married the diplomat Lvov. . . . But when early in the winter of this year Levin came to Moscow, after a year in the country, and saw the Shcherbatskys, he realized which of the three sisters he was indeed destined to love.” Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 25; This point is noted by Morson, *Anna Karenina in Our Time*, 68.

²¹⁵ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 41.

²¹⁶ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 41.

²¹⁷ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 41.

the glamorous social excitement represented by Vronsky. As Morson notes, Kitty initially mistakes romantic intensity for genuine love because she accepts the cultural belief according to which love should appear decisive and emotionally overwhelming.²¹⁸ Influenced by the romantic expectations and social pressures surrounding her first season in society, she thus associates love with emotional excitement, elegance, and public admiration rather than with the quiet intimacy Levin offers. Vronsky's cultivated charm and apparent devotion seem to align more closely with her understanding of love, while Levin's sincerity, rural simplicity, and emotional seriousness seem unexciting and overly familiar. Their separation after her rejection reveals the vulnerability of the assumptions both characters bring to love: Levin's belief that emotional sincerity alone guarantees mutual understanding and Kitty's belief in the reliability of romantic attraction and social brilliance. The resulting distance becomes formative for both of them, compelling each to reconsider the expectations they carry into marriage.²¹⁹ Her rejection of Levin and attraction to Vronsky consequently reveal both personal confusion and the influence of social expectations regarding courtship and marriage, where emotional excitement and a socially successful match appear more desirable.

Upon their reunion in Part 4, Levin and Kitty's relationship resumes under revised conditions, since both have been forced by separation, disillusionment, and emotional self-reflection to reconsider their earlier assumptions about love and marriage. When Levin and Kitty meet again at the Oblonskys' house after Kitty's disappointment in Vronsky and recovery from the emotional collapse that follows it, the second proposal takes place indirectly in the famous chalk scene,²²⁰ where both communicate by writing initials and unfinished phrases. As

²¹⁸ Morson, *Anna Karenina in Our Time*, 75.

²¹⁹ Morson, *Anna Karenina in Our Time*, 75.

²²⁰ Tolstoy similarly used abbreviated written exchanges during his courtship with his fiancée Sophia Behrs (Sonya); see Bartlett, *Tolstoy*, 244.

Morson argues, the famous second proposal scene should not be read as evidence of mystical predestination or supernatural union between two souls.²²¹ Because Levin and Kitty have both reflected upon the same refusal and regret for months, they are able to understand one another through shared memory and attentiveness rather than romantic destiny, and the scene already anticipates the kind of understanding their marriage later requires. Their reconciliation establishes a marriage grounded not in perfect fusion but in the gradual development of the ability to recognize, interpret, and respond to one another's feelings, anxieties, and needs over time. The narrative consequently devotes considerable attention to the ordinary negotiations through which this intimacy is sustained, presenting Levin and Kitty's marriage as the only relationship in the novel whose development after marriage moves toward greater intimacy as opposed to division or deterioration. Its stability emerges from the spouses' ability to negotiate household responsibilities, emotional misunderstandings, personal independence, and the everyday obligations of shared life.

The period from reconciliation to engagement exposes Levin and Kitty's relationship to the social rituals and obligations accompanying marriage. Their first months of engagement show that the happiness Levin envisioned prior to the wedding does not eliminate emotional difficulty but instead produces a new and unpredicted combination of joy and vulnerability. Levin had imagined marriage to be a state of transparent harmony; nevertheless, the reality of engagement confronts him with feelings he had not anticipated. The narrator remarks that during these days, "Levin was in a continual state of awkwardness and discomfort, but the intensity of his happiness went on all the while increasing."²²² He had hoped that his happiness would remain private and special, worrying that "the ordinary conditions of engaged couples would spoil his special

²²¹ Morson, *Anna Karenina in Our Time*, 77.

²²² Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 428.

happiness.”²²³ Instead, the engagement turns his joy into a public event as relatives, friends, shopkeepers, and even mere acquaintances become involved in it by their congratulations, presents, and visits. Levin is aware that “a great deal was being expected of him—what, he did not know,”²²⁴ and he finds himself performing social obligations he had never associated with personal happiness. Yet the narrator also observes that “he did everything he was told, and it all gave him happiness,”²²⁵ suggesting that the social rituals surrounding marriage intensify rather than diminish his emotional fulfillment. In this light, Levin’s awkwardness is brought about by the tension between the intensely personal nature of his happiness and the fact that such happiness must be mediated through shared social forms. The beginning of Levin and Kitty’s married life is consequently presented not as an attempt to escape social conventions, as Anna and Vronsky’s relationship does, but as a gradual accommodation between private feeling and the communal structures through which marriage acquires continuity, public recognition, and stability.

Kitty’s response to Levin’s moral anxieties reveals one of the central dynamics through which their marriage acquires stability. Certain that there be no concealment in their marriage, Levin insists that “between him and her there could not be, and should not be, secrets,”²²⁶ and thus hands Kitty the diary²²⁷ in which he had written what he calls “his lack of purity and his lack of faith.”²²⁸ Reading the confessional diary, Kitty appears distressed to Levin: “the other confession set her weeping bitterly”²²⁹ and when he later sees her “tear-stained, pitiful, sweet

²²³ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 428.

²²⁴ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 428.

²²⁵ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 428.

²²⁶ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 429.

²²⁷ This scene reflects Tolstoy’s own experience: shortly before his marriage, he gave to his fiancée Sofia Andreyevna Behrs (Sonya Tolstoya) his personal diaries, which included accounts of his sexual past with peasant women; see Bartlett, *Tolstoy*, 246-247.

²²⁸ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 429.

²²⁹ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 429.

face, miserable with suffering he had caused and nothing could undo,”²³⁰ he perceives “the abyss that separated his shameful past from her dovelike purity.”²³¹ The scene is therefore shaped less by direct access to Kitty’s inner experience than by Levin’s shame-stricken interpretation of her suffering and of the moral distance he believes separates them. Whereas Levin experiences the confession as exposing an almost irreparable moral division, Kitty responds according to a different moral logic. She does not refute the pain his confession causes her, “Take them, take these dreadful books!”²³² but she nevertheless forgives him, “Yes, I forgive you; but it’s terrible!”²³³ Kitty acknowledges the seriousness of Levin’s sexual past without allowing it to determine the future of their relationship. In doing so, she establishes a pattern that takes place throughout their marriage, in which Levin’s intense self-scrutiny and moral anxiety are balanced by Kitty’s ability to absorb emotional crises before they become destructive. Levin himself recognizes this imbalance after his confession, feeling that “more than ever he considered himself unworthy of her, morally bowed down lower than ever before her, and prized more highly than ever his undeserved happiness.”²³⁴ The confessional diary scene therefore shows that their marriage’s stability depends less on Levin’s pursuit of moral purity than on Kitty’s capacity to transform moments of potential rupture into renewed commitment.

The early months of Levin and Kitty’s marriage expose that their relationship develops not through the preservation of romantic harmony but through continual negotiation with the mundane tensions of shared life. The narrative stresses that Levin’s experience of marriage contrasts radically with what he had imagined: “Levin had been married three months. He was

²³⁰ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 429.

²³¹ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 429.

²³² Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 429.

²³³ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 429.

²³⁴ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 18: 429-430.

happy, but not at all in the way he had expected to be.”²³⁵ Instead of the “ideal of exalted happiness”²³⁶ Levin had envisioned, he encounters the repetitive demands and adjustments of everyday domestic existence. The narrator compares this realization to a man who had admired “the smooth, happy course of a little boat on a lake”²³⁷ from the shore and then discovers, and once inside the boat, that one must “think too, not for an instant to forget where one was floating; and that there was water under one, and that one must row; and that his unaccustomed hands would be sore.”²³⁸ The metaphor transforms marriage from an object of romantic contemplation into a form of continuous labor requiring effort, attention, and endurance.²³⁹ As the narrator describes, Levin had imagined that he would “do his work, and to find repose from it in the happiness of love,”²⁴⁰ while Kitty “ought to be beloved, and nothing more.”²⁴¹ Instead, he discovers that married life is “entirely made up of the pettiest details,”²⁴² he used to despise: household organization, guests, servants, meals, and domestic routines. He is startled that “she, his poetic, exquisite Kitty, could... think, remember, and busy herself about tablecloths, and furniture, about mattresses for visitors, about a tray, about the cook, and the dinner.”²⁴³ Yet what initially appears to Levin as disappointing banality turns out to be one of the foundations of their shared life, so that “this sweet care of her household... was one of the new happy surprises.”²⁴⁴ Levin’s growing appreciation of Kitty’s domestic labor therefore marks his abandonment of the

²³⁵ Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 19, *Anna Karenina*, *chasti 5-8* (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo “Khudozhestvennaia literatura,” 1935), 47.

²³⁶ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 19: 49.

²³⁷ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 19: 48.

²³⁸ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 19: 48.

²³⁹ Morson, *Anna Karenina in Our Time*, 69.

²⁴⁰ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 19: 48.

²⁴¹ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 19: 48.

²⁴² Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 19: 48.

²⁴³ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 19: 48.

²⁴⁴ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 19: 48.

romantic idealization, as he comes to recognize that the durability of shared life depends on the ordinary forms of care and domestic work he had earlier dismissed as trivial.

Yet Levin's growing appreciation of ordinary domestic life does not eliminate conflict from the marriage, since Levin and Kitty's attempts of learning to share everyday existence exposes differences in expectation, emotional sensitivity, and habit between two spouses. The disputes arise "exceedingly often too, on the most unexpected and trivial grounds,"²⁴⁵ turning even minor accidents into emotional confrontations. Their first serious quarrel begins with a seemingly insignificant event: Levin returns half an hour later than expected after visiting a new farmhouse. Kitty, having spent the entire time anxiously waiting by the window, greets him with reproach and jealousy: "You've been enjoying yourself."²⁴⁶ The intensity of her reaction forces Levin to recognize that marriage has altered the boundaries between them so completely that "he was not simply close to her, but that he did not know where he ended and she began."²⁴⁷ The quarrel places him in a difficult position because proving himself right would only aggravate her suffering, while accepting blame feels irrational and unjust. Describing his reaction, the narrator compares him to a man who turns angrily after receiving a violent blow only to discover that "there is no one to be angry with, and that he must put up with and try to soothe the pain."²⁴⁸ Levin gradually realizes that Kitty's emotional distress cannot be separated from his own, even when her jealousy appears unreasonable to him. Their reconciliation produces what the narrator calls a "new, redoubled happiness."²⁴⁹ However, this quarrel is only one of many that follow. The narrative emphasizes that during this early stage of marriage, the couple is still learning what matters to one another, so that many of their arguments become so trivial that afterward they can

²⁴⁵ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 19: 51.

²⁴⁶ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 19: 50.

²⁴⁷ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 19: 50.

²⁴⁸ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 19: 50.

²⁴⁹ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 19: 51.

barely remember what caused them. The narrative consequently reverses the conventional image of the honeymoon as a period of uninterrupted bliss: Levin and Kitty later remember it instead as “the bitterest and most humiliating period,”²⁵⁰ full of “monstrous, shameful incidents”²⁵¹ both try to forget. By the third month, however, “their life began to go more smoothly,”²⁵² suggesting that marital stability is not about the absence of conflict but the gradual adjustment that follows it.

The greatest restructuring of Levin and Kitty’s marriage comes with the pregnancy and birth of their first child, when the emotional and philosophical tensions haunting Levin’s mind are confronted directly with Kitty’s physical suffering during labor. Throughout the novel Levin troubles himself with abstract questions regarding the meaning of life, faith, and moral purpose. Nevertheless, his thoughts remain largely intellectual until Kitty’s torment during delivery strips away the philosophical distance through which he had previously approached such questions and he, an unbeliever, finds himself praying “not with his lips only.”²⁵³ Seeing Kitty go through the pain of labor, he realizes that he has no control over what is happening and no ability to relieve her suffering: “there was nothing to be done but bear it; every instant feeling that he had reached the utmost limits of his endurance, and that his heart would break with sympathy and pain.”²⁵⁴ The experience deprives him of the detached logic through which he used to reflect upon life’s fundamental questions. It is also the first moment when he fully confronts the vulnerability of the woman whose presence has gradually become inseparable from his own sense of existence. When the labor finally ends and “Kitty was alive, her agony was over,”²⁵⁵ Levin experiences a form of happiness very different from the romantic fulfillment he had once imagined: “he was

²⁵⁰ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 19: 51.

²⁵¹ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 19: 51.

²⁵² Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 19: 51.

²⁵³ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 19: 286.

²⁵⁴ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 19: 290.

²⁵⁵ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 19: 294.

unutterably happy. That he understood; he was completely happy in it.”²⁵⁶ At this point, Levin’s love acquires a different character in that it is not expressed in admiration or romantic fulfillment but in the recognition that his sense of life cannot be separated from the physical reality, suffering, and vulnerability of his family.

Levin’s initial reaction towards his newborn child indicates that parental attachment, just as marital intimacy, develops gradually rather than arriving as an immediate revelation: “Levin, looking at the tiny, pitiful creature, made strenuous efforts to discover in his heart some traces of fatherly feeling for it.”²⁵⁷ Having expected the child to awaken spontaneous joy and tenderness, Levin is instead confronted by “the aged-looking little face”²⁵⁸ that seems only to demand care and attention while offering nothing in return. He realizes that he can come to love his son only through the shared life he already has with Kitty. Just as Levin had earlier been forced to abandon the image of “ideal” Kitty and learn to love her as a real person, he must now move beyond the abstract fantasy of fatherhood toward the exhausting and ordinary reality of caring for a newborn child. The search for universal truth that had guided Levin’s philosophical inquiries thus gives way to more a particular truth: meaning is discovered in continued participation in the ordinary and imperfect life shared among husband, wife, and child. Tolstoy presents this domestic continuity not as a lesser alternative to passion or transcendence but as the only form of human relationship capable of sustaining intimacy, responsibility, and moral stability over time.

Anna Karenina transforms the social institution of marriage into a complex system of moral and emotional inquiry. Tolstoy presents feeling not as a fixed moral truth but as a force that

²⁵⁶ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 19: 294.

²⁵⁷ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 19: 295.

²⁵⁸ Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 19: 296.

acquires its shape through time, repetition, labor, and interpretation. The narrative's comparative structure, juxtaposing lust and labor, form and sincerity, eros and emotional extremity, creates a spectrum of incomplete solutions rather than a hierarchy of successful and failed unions. In this sense, the sequence of four central marriages operates as a graded exploration of how marital relationships endure or collapse under different moral and emotional conditions. The Oblonskys' marriage demonstrates that domestic stability can survive through spiritual bankruptcy: likable Stiva's emptiness and Dolly's endurance preserve the outward form of marriage while hollowing out its meaning. The Karenins show the sterility of a marriage governed by propriety, where routine and reputation replace emotional reciprocity. Anna and Vronsky attempt to escape the social form through passion alone, only to discover that desire detached from stable structures ultimately consumes itself. Finally, Levin and Kitty, by contrast, gradually turn marriage into an ethical and emotional practice, sustained through compromise, forgiveness, domestic labor, and continual readjustment. By placing these households beside one another, Tolstoy turns the domestic sphere into a comparative experiment in the durability of attachment, tracing how each marriage survives or disintegrates according to its capacity to endure time, absorb conflict, and cultivate and practice moral attention within ordinary life. Through this comparative design, Tolstoy also redefines the scope of domestic fiction and the meaning of realism. The novel refuses to divide marriages into simple moral categories of good and bad, instead recording the slow processes through which love becomes habit, habit becomes duty, and duty either acquires moral meaning or leads to despair. Even Levin and Kitty's relative harmony is earned gradually through misunderstanding, jealousy, physical labor, and mutual accommodation. Their marriage achieves stability because both Levin and Kitty learn to continue living together despite conflict, imperfection, and disappointment.

By concluding the novel within the ordinary stillness of Levin's family life, Tolstoy closes his experiment on a note of provisional stability rather than final resolution. Where Stiva's habitual laughter, Anna's destructive passion, and Karenin's formality remain unable to develop beyond fixed emotional patterns, Levin's household endures because it accepts incompleteness and change as unavoidable conditions of shared existence. The ending of the chapter thus affirms Tolstoy's central insight: marriage, stripped of illusion, remains the primary space in which the self confronts the demands of responsibility, forgiveness, and moral renewal.

Conclusion

This thesis has argued that Leo Tolstoy treats marriage not as a stable social category but as a narrative structure in which emotional and moral life is exposed to time, reflection, and social pressure. By introducing the concept of the "laboratory of marriage," the study has redefined *Family Happiness* and *Anna Karenina* as interconnected stages in Tolstoy's broader investigation into the durability of love within ordinary life. Rather than locating the sources of crisis within Tolstoy's marriages solely in adultery, incompatibility, or institutional decline, the thesis has shown that instability is generated from within marriage itself. Tolstoy's realism therefore lies not simply in his representation of domestic life but in his attention to temporal process: emotions alter when subjected to repetition, self-consciousness, visibility, and unequal expectations between spouses. Ultimately, this thesis has sought to reposition marriage at the center of Tolstoy's realism not simply as a thematic concern but as a formal and philosophical method. Marriage functions in *Family Happiness* and *Anna Karenina* as the privileged site where Tolstoy examines the question of how meaningful human life can be sustained.

Through Masha's retrospective narration, *Family Happiness* organizes marriage into a sequence of experimental stages, tracing how emotional unity gradually gives way to distance, interpretation, and asymmetry. The early idyll between Masha and Sergey depends on fragile and artificial conditions that cannot endure: rural isolation, asymmetrical authority, and the absence of reflection. Once Masha enters St. Petersburg society, her emotional life becomes mediated through visibility, admiration, and comparison, while Sergey attempts to preserve moral stability through withdrawal and restraint. The crisis of their marriage emerges not because love disappears but because the very attempt to sustain emotional immediacy transforms in into an object of reflection. By the novella's conclusion, marriage survives only through the redistribution of feeling into domestic continuity, parenthood, and habit. In this sense, *Family Happiness* does not oppose romantic love to marriage; rather, it demonstrates how marriage changes the meaning of love itself. The analysis of *Family Happiness* also demonstrated that Tolstoy's earliest sustained treatment of marriage already contains the central tensions later radicalized in *Anna Karenina*: between intimacy and social visibility, and romantic attachment and the routines of marriage.

Anna Karenina expands this model by transforming a single marital experiment into a comparative structure of parallel relationships organized through shifting perspectives and a more mature narrative form. The thesis has argued that Tolstoy constructs the novel through a system of marriages that expose different forms of imbalance between feeling and social form. Stiva and Dolly reveal the capacity of marriage to continue externally despite emotional exhaustion, sustained through routine and habit rather than reciprocity. Anna and Karenin embody the contradiction between formal social order and emotional openness. The relationship between Anna and Vronsky initially appears to offer an escape from the artificiality of Anna's

marriage, yet the thesis showed that it reproduces instability in the form of emotional exclusivity, dependence, and the inability to sustain shared life beyond passion itself. Against these unstable and emotionally empty marriages, Levin and Kitty offer Tolstoy's most viable model of marriage, though not an idealized one. Their relationship achieves relative stability only after the abandonment of romantic absolutism and the development of prosaic love through compromise, adjustment, and shared labor. Taken together, these marriages reveal that Tolstoy's concern is neither the defense nor the rejection of marriage as an institution but the difficulty of sustaining alignment between desire, morality, and social existence over time.

Across both texts, the thesis has also emphasized the gendered asymmetry built into Tolstoy's representation of marriage. In *Family Happiness* and *Anna Karenina* alike, women bear the burden of preserving emotional and moral coherence within the family while remaining subject to social judgement and male expectations. The comparative structure of *Anna Karenina* especially demonstrates that men and women experience marital failure differently: Stiva's infidelity leaves his social position intact, whereas Anna's transgression results in exclusion and destruction. Drawing on feminist criticism, the thesis argued that Tolstoy exposes the unequal structure of marriage even while remaining partially constrained by the patriarchal assumptions of his own cultural context. Women in his works are repeatedly required to occupy roles defined through male expectations, and their attempts to move beyond those roles reveal the limited social possibilities available to them.

Several directions for further research emerge from this thesis. First, the concept of the "laboratory of marriage" could be extended to other works by Tolstoy, especially *War and Peace* and *The Kreutzer Sonata*, where questions of sexuality, morality, and family are positioned under different ideological conditions. Second, comparative studies placing Tolstoy alongside other

realist works such as *Middlemarch* by George Eliot or *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert could further explore how nineteenth-century realism uses marriage as a narrative structure for examining modern forms of emotional, moral, and social life. Such study would help situate Tolstoy's treatment of marriage within European literary debate about female sexuality, the reality of marital life, and individuality while also clarifying the distinctiveness of his psychological and temporal approach to domestic fiction. Third, further research could expand the scope of this thesis beyond the novel's four central marriages by examining the secondary relationships and family structures that remain at the margins of *Anna Karenina* yet complicate its vision of marriage and intimacy. The aristocratic union of Princess Betsy Tverskaya and Tushkevich-oriented salon society, for instance, presents another model of marriage founded on tolerated infidelity and the preservation of social propriety, where appearances matter more than emotional or moral sincerity. By contrast, the unrealized relationship between Konstantin Koznyshev (Levin's brother) and Varvara Andreevna (Varenka) represents a form of emotional compatibility that never reaches marriage itself. The relationship between Nikolay Levin and Marya Nikolaevna, meanwhile, offers an unconventional companionship existing beyond social respectability, complicating the novel's distinction between "fallen" and legitimate unions. Finally, future studies might also consider the non-aristocratic families briefly observed by Levin in the countryside, where shared labor, mutual dependence, and collective purpose suggest an alternative model of domestic harmony largely absent from aristocratic society. Together, these peripheral relationships indicate that Tolstoy's exploration of marriage goes beyond the novel's major couples and encompasses a much wider social and moral spectrum.

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