The Fall: Discussing Fate, Myth, and Womanhood in *Anna Karenina*

Ava Giles
Columbia University, Columbia College

Leo Tolstoy's portraits of women in *Anna Karenina* appear to be indivisible from his own predilections and moral alignment as the narrator of the story. Women in Tolstoy's novels often seem to exist in tropes of his own making, disconnected from the world outside his works. Consequently, Tolstoy's rendering of the ideal woman––often dubbed the "Tolstoyan woman" by contemporary audiences––is frequently dismissed as a formulaic, two-dimensional, stereotypical characterization of the female experience in nineteenth century Imperial Russia, a mere extension of Tolstoy's value system. The Tolstoyan woman thus becomes an amalgam of slippery and smooth personality traits, a woman thoroughly polished of her rough edges and callous behavior, rather than a varied individual independent from this archetype. The Tolstoyan woman adheres to the ideals of home life as dictated by the men around her, passing through girlhood and falling into the duties of marriage and motherhood with such a sudden transition that there is no tangible period of adolescence. She poses no objection to the social parameters foisted upon her, and resigns any desire for independence without protest, accepting her new role as accessory to her husband.

The exception to the rule which disproves Tolstoy's reliance on the trope of the Tolstoyan woman is Anna Karenina's character. Anna's character journey utterly shirks ideal womanhood. At first glance, Tolstoy appears to condemn Anna's adulterous depravity by writing her path through the novel as a warning to those who follow in her footsteps, vindicating those who align their moral compass with his own. From this angle, Anna's character journey represents the shadowy inverse of the uncorrupted feminine, standing in opposition to the morally upright society woman. Read superficially, Tolstoy penned the story of an immoral woman, punishing her for her wickedness through his authority as author and as the creator of the novel's omnipotent narrator. Reading *Anna Karenina* this way, the work of a man tormenting a woman for her debauchery, does both a disservice to Tolstoy's ability as a writer and reduces Anna to a puppet entirely devoid of agency. Pitting Anna against his framework of pure

womanhood as little more than a means of illustrating a binary opposition in which Anna counterbalances the ideal feminine compresses Anna's story into a digestible Tolstoyan parable–a warning, even–about what might happen if the womanly code of conduct goes disregarded. This uncharitable view of Anna, Tolstoy, and the novel itself proves questionable when Anna's narrative journey is examined in closer detail.

I suggest that Anna's plight, instead of merely acting as a juxtaposition to the model of the faithful, wholesome Tolstoyan woman, follows a different narrative formula. Her character strays from the ideal feminine, shirking the traits of the Tolstoyan woman. In doing so, Anna is swept up in the undertow of a much more forceful archetype: the mythical hero. Anna is chained to myth, and her relationship to the ideal feminine in *Anna Karenina* is colored by her trajectory away from the human and towards the fabled. How she is spoken about, how she views herself, and how Tolstoy as narrator frames her actions all point towards her place in the novel as not only not her own, but belonging to an epic tradition much larger than herself. In this light, Anna's fall from the dizzying heights of the aristocratic circles she frequents is a consequence of the inevitability of fate rather than a blunt criticism of her violations of social propriety. *Anna Karenina* is not purely Tolstoy's epic morality tale, railing against unfaithful women in favor of exalting those unsullied. Instead, Tolstoy leverages the rich narrative traditions of allegory and myth to comment on the implications of Anna's perpetual entrapment between social expectation and the imposing mythical shoes she must fill. She is placed by Tolstoy on a pedestal alongside mythic heroines and figures of biblical allegory. The only way down from such a great height is a leap and a tumble into free fall. Tolstoy's writing Anna into suicide is less an indictment of her dysfunctional approach to relationships than it is her failed attempt to escape the archetypes to which she is bound, those of the mythic woman rather than the ideal.

Tolstoy often draws on folkloric and heroic archetypes, deliberately linking Anna's character to motifs found both in epic myth and in folk stories. Anna's ultimate failure to align herself with the ideal feminine suggests that the path down which this ideal can be reached is one of restriction, rather than achievement. For the Tolstoyan woman, there is no room for misstep or error. Once a sin has been committed, there is no possibility of redemption. The fallen woman condemned to suffer at the hands of her own agency—especially if by exercising that agency she reveals truth–draws parallels to both Apuleius's story "Eros and Psyche" from The Golden Ass and the fall of Eve in the book of Genesis. Both of these characters, Eve and Psyche, are linked to Anna through the transgression of boundaries or rules in order to obtain knowledge about their relationships, to both their partners and to the wider world. Both these myths showcase portraits of women deliberately crossing the bridge from purity and ignorance into sin in attempts to understand or transcend the roles they occupy. Both Eve and Psyche suffer as a result of breaching their respective social confines. Anna is further trapped by this mythic association: the public exposure of her affair with Alexei Vronsky is a wholesale rejection of her place in society as a well-bred, married, aristocratic mother. Falling victim to scandal and social ostracization, Anna is tied to archetypal women such as Eve and

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Psyche, rather than Tolstoy's blueprint of docile womanhood. Her public rejection of the ideal feminine from her perch at the top of high society leaves Anna no choice but to forge her own path forward. Straying from the prescribed trail, Anna finds herself at the mercy of a much larger, crueler judge: parable.

The first suggestion of Anna's fate appears in a misattribution of Hans Christian Andersen's 1847 fairy tale "The Shadow," botched by society chatter and transmogrified into a nonexistent fable by the Brothers Grimm. In Andersen's original rendition, a man loses his shadow, is enslaved by it, ostracized from society for lacking a shadow at all, and then sentenced to execution by his shadowy double, who ultimately assumes the man's social role. The double then courts and marries a princess in a neighboring kingdom. The contents of "The Shadow" appear in a conversation between Anna's friends, who slander Anna and Alexei Karenin behind their backs. Through this gossip, we catch a glimpse of Anna's unsavory fairy tale fate:

'Anna's changed very much since her trip to Moscow. There's something strange about her,' said a friend of hers.

'The main change is that she's brought a shadow with her–Alexei Vronsky,' said the ambassador's wife.

'What of it? Grimm has a fable–a man without a shadow, a man deprived of a shadow. And it's his punishment for something. I could never understand where the punishment lay. But it must be unpleasant for a woman to be without a shadow.'

'Yes, but women with a shadow generally end badly,' said Anna's friend.[1]

The tale is reconstituted poorly and, despite the informality of gossipy conversation, the retelling assumes an ominous tone. The rendering shifts a rather innocuous fairy tale into the genre of parable and fable, a genre governed by the dictates of morality. Anna's social predicament is made mysterious and parabolic through her connection to the tale.[2] Furthermore, murder present in the original Andersen story is absent in conversation, turning a fairytale warning against losing one's shadow into a punishment for an unknown crime. Anna is shamelessly gawked at and gossiped about, and the gossip transforms her relationship to Vronsky from an objective account into a muddled folk aphorism. The reader is unable to do anything but join the ranks of the onlookers and partake in the spectacle, a morality play in which a woman is doggedly pursued by her nefarious shadow. It is important to note that in order to cast a shadow at all, one must first step into the light. Anna's shadow is a direct consequence of this step—she is ridiculed for leaving the safety of the shadows and casting one instead. The purpose of connecting Anna's plight with that of the protagonist in "The Shadow" is twofold. Firstly, there is an ominous flavor to the gossip. The criticism Anna receives for casting a "shadow" implies that it is a violation of social decorum for a woman to step far enough into the light to cast one. Though she exercises personal agency by stepping into the spotlight of scrutiny, Anna is relegated to following fables and is subsequently

1. Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Penguin Group, 2002), 135.
2. The word in the Russian text is басня (fable, parable) rather than сказка (story, folk tale, fairy tale), which would be a better fit if the story was correctly attributed to Andersen. The Russian text of *Anna Karenina* reads: "У Гримма есть басня…" This comports with the idea that a half-remembered, misattributed story exists somehow outside of the text. Because of this it is more of a morality lesson or judgment to be applied to Anna and Vronsky than it is a physical, referenceable document with a concrete message. The gossip becomes a folk tale instead of a story not through its adherence to parabolic narrative conventions, but instead because it transcends the physical text in favor of intertextual reference.

barred from participating in her own story. She loses narrative agency because her image is warped by gossip mongers offering unsolicited commentary, and because the nature of the story itself is symbolic of her ultimate fate. Tolstoy concocts a mushy, malleable fable and applies it in a paste to Anna. Though it is rife with corrupted details and nebulous harbingers of bad things to come, the foreshadowing of Anna's unsavory fate remains clear. Secondly, the tale casts Anna and Vronsky into the roles of shadowless man and shadow, respectively. Vronsky acts as Anna's shadow, representing her venture into the socially unacceptable. This descent into the taboo is only appropriate to discuss—even behind Anna's back—in a roundabout way, in the context of fairy tales. Vronsky looms over her like a shadow; Anna's condemnation for having such a shadow suggests that her inability to halt or alter the course of her life is in part because she is already cast by those around her into the role of the irredeemable. Vronsky is distorted by society chatter as well––he is not the shadow man who kills her, as would be the case if the plot of the Andersen tale was accurately mirrored in the novel. Instead, he is repackaged as a worrying symptom of Anna's violations of the social order.

The motif of being spurned for stepping into the light continues through Anna's connection to Genesis and Eve's fall from Eden, this time in the form of "spiritual nakedness" as Anna realizes the gravity of her affair with Vronsky and is overwhelmed by shame:

"Looking at him, she physically felt her humiliation and could say nothing more. And he felt what a murderer must feel when he looks at the body he has deprived of life. This body deprived of life was their love, the first period of their love. There was something horrible in his recollections of what had been paid for with this terrible price of shame. Shame at her spiritual nakedness weighed on her and communicated itself to him. But, despite all the murderer's horror before the murdered body, he had to cut this body into pieces and hide it, he had to make use of what the murderer had gained by his murder."[3]

The notion of spiritual nudity and the bisection of Anna and Vronsky's relationship into a concrete period of ignorance and post-transgression governed by overwhelming shame is a blatant reference to Genesis 3:7: "[...] then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves." If we intertwine their paths, Eve's culpability in original sin implicates Anna as the primary instigator of her downfall–and she has taken Vronsky, the Adam figure, down with her as an accomplice.[4] The tandem fall appears both in Genesis and in the aftermath of Anna's shame. In *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy frames their shame as a joint burden: "She held his hand and did not move. [...] Yes, and this one hand, which will always be mine, is the hand of my accomplice."[5] The same is true of Genesis in the idea that there must necessarily be an exile from Eden when man attempts to wield the power of knowledge like God:

"See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever– therefore the Lord God send him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken." [6]

3. Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, 149.
4. Genesis 3:6, New Oxford Annotated Bible.
5. Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, 150.
6. Genesis 3:22-23, New Oxford Annotated Bible.

Anna and Vronsky deliberately disregard social pressures and continue their affair even after exposure and realization, each neglecting to truly understand or know each other for fear of destroying the curated images of one another to which they cling so dearly. They try, even after realization, to shroud their spiritual nakedness and return to a time before awareness. Vronsky and Anna's relationship is thus defined by Anna's attempt to climb back over the garden wall, into Eden, back into shadow––even after light has already flooded in. It should also be noted that Eve's crossing from the unknown into the known is a necessary component of the story. When viewed through this lens, Anna's fall into self-awareness and mortification is necessary for the themes of her narrative. The gates to ideal womanhood have closed; in the same way that Vronsky looks at the bloodied corpse of their once perfect, passionate, ignorant love, in the same way that Adam and Eve eventually generate the rest of humanity after their exile from Eden, Anna must now decide how to proceed after her fall. Though Eve's womanhood is defined by violation, without transgression, the biblical human story would dissolve.

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Tolstoy gives Anna some awareness of the polarity between her temptation to transgress the social order and the urge to retreat back into the comfortable shadows of polite society at the very end of her role in the novel: "[...]reason was given to us in order to rid ourselves of it. So I must rid myself of it. Why not put out the candle, if there's nothing more to look at, if it's vile to look at it all?"[7] Anna's final thoughts as the train strikes her center on the acute pain of knowledge: "[...] the candle by the light of which she had been reading that book filled with anxieties, deceptions, grief and evil, flared up brighter than ever, lit up for her all that had once been in darkness, sputtered, grew dim, and went out for ever."[8] The twin motifs of illumination and extinguishment, alongside the notion that lighting the way will only ever reveal the treacherous and miserable path ahead, provides two possible interpretations: first, that it is better not to seek knowledge at all and remain in the comfort of darkness, or, second, that the light cast upon knowledge is an inevitability, and that knowledge must be gleaned at the expense of the self. Anna's mythic journey through the novel and her trajectory away from docile womanhood suggest that she follows the latter path, transforming her into something larger than herself.

This interpretation is corroborated by the introduction of "Eros and Psyche." Psyche's story is narratively and thematically similar to Anna's: Psyche is wooed by Eros, whose identity remains a secret to her––their affair operates outside the bounds of social propriety so as to be kept hidden from his mother, Venus. Psyche, like Anna, bears an illegitimate daughter with a romantic and mysterious male figure. Additionally, Psyche, like Anna, is punished by her mother-in-law for violating the terms of her relationship with Eros.[9,10] All of these

7. Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, 766.
8. Tolstoy, Anna Karenina, 768
9. Apuleius, "Eros and Psyche," in *The Golden Ass*, trans. by Sarah Ruden (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 160.
10. Psyche's punishment entails sorting a pile of grain piece by piece in a single afternoon. She enlists the help of ants (a fairy tale motif which occurs in other stories such as "Cinderella"), but not without first lamenting the cruelty and injustice of the predicament she caused by betraying Eros.

mythic parallels cast Anna as a variation of an archetype established by Psyche, but the specific moment of Psyche's transgression against Eros bears striking and deliberate resemblance to the image of Anna holding a candle over Vronsky's sleeping body in one of her final scenes in the novel. In Psyche's case, her quest to reveal her lover's identity, using the light of knowledge to examine Love, is thwarted by her clumsiness––oil drips from her lamp and burns Eros, causing him to wake and realize that Psyche has betrayed him. Psyche and Eros eventually make amends, and their happy ending as an Olympian couple is facilitated by Psyche's violation of trust: her duplicity is revealed, she is punished for it, but she is redeemed. Psyche eventually seizes what she pursues– she is initially spurned and punished for trying, but she is ultimately granted knowledge of Eros. She is allowed to know, tame, and live amongst Love. In the world of *Anna Karenina*, however, though Anna too seeks to satiate her hunger for knowledge, it only leads her into insecurity and jealousy:

"He was in the study fast asleep. She went over to him and, lighting his face from above, looked at him for a long time. Now, when he was asleep, she loved him so much that, looking at him, she could not keep back tears of tenderness; but she knew that if he woke up he would give her a cold look, conscious of his own rightness, and that before talking to him of her love, she would have to prove to him how guilty he was before her. She went back to her room without waking him up […]"[11]

Anna does not transgress her as explicitly as Psyche does in Apuleius' tale, and the reason for this is that Anna, despite her connection to Psyche, is disallowed from participating in Psyche's reward: love. She is trapped in the limbo of a lack of being caught and judged by Vronsky, unable to repent for knowledge she unrelentingly pursues because no one is there to judge and sentence her. Anna is condemned to an inward-turning spiral of anxiety and self-awareness without any promise of some ultimate reward for her pursuit of knowledge––whether that reward is love or even simply the knowledge itself. Anna's uncoupling from the Tolstoyan woman happens when she attempts to leverage her relationship with Vronsky as a means of escaping her constrained role in society. She indulges in the taboo of adultery, forcefully weaponizing and publicly indulging in the forbidden, sloppily forging her own path forward. However, she is never able to completely separate light from shadow in order to become the shadowless man. Anna's diversion from the archetype of the Tolstoyan woman is made possible because she careens headlong into myths of women punished for transcending or unable to escape the social framework in which they operate. Anna's first steps into the light of knowledge leave her casting ominous shadow: Vronsky. Her parallels to Genesis as the narrative gains pace illustrate that Anna is not meant to occupy the light associated with God and with Eden. She is cast out of Paradise alongside her shadow in embarrassing spiritual nudity. Finally, Anna weaponizes the light of knowledge to look upon Vronsky, illuminating her own shadow. Ultimately, she decides to extinguish the light of knowledge once and for all because it is she who has been so badly burned by stepping into it. Anna's fraught path through womanhood in *Anna Karenina* is anything but a condemnation of her transgressive actions. It is the story of a woman extricated from the fetters of social propriety, transcending one archetype and joining another. Instead of blaming Anna for her disobedience, *Anna Karenina* illustrates the necessity of her fall.

11. Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina,* 752.

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