

From *Anna Karenina* to *To the Lighthouse*: Virginia Woolf's Response to Tolstoy's Portrayal of Motherhood

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While writing *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf took time out to give a talk to a group of Hayes Court schoolgirls. In “How Should One Read a Book?” (1926), the first of three essay versions of this talk, Woolf suggests comparing Richardson’s *Clarissa Harlowe* to *Anna Karenina*. Among other things, she asks “And how does our emotion at different crises of the two books compare? And what must we attribute to the eighteenth century, and what to Russia and the translator?” In effect, what she is doing is asking readers to use their reading as an anthropological tool. Measuring books against each other, she suggests, is a way of questioning society and of recalibrating our standard of values.

In *To the Lighthouse* (1927) Woolf deliberately included elements of *Anna Karenina* (1878), thereby putting into practice some of the ideas contained in her essay. For instance, the still-born marriage proposal between Varenka and Sergei is a template for the suspended courtship between William Bankes and Lily, just as Paul and Minta’s passionate glow

at the *Beauf en Daube* dinner replicates that of Levin and Kitty during the central, *soupe Marie Louise* banquet in *Anna Karenina*. On the motherhood front, Woolf accepts, expands, and sometimes contradicts many of Tolstoy's ideas. By probing parallels between the two novels, and by questioning how Woolf's ideas about motherhood compare to Tolstoy's, my paper will examine how Woolf used her novel as a vehicle to challenge ideas of motherhood in popular culture.

The question of motherhood is central to *Anna Karenina*, just as it was to Russian society at the time Tolstoy wrote his novel. As was true in Victorian England, women of marriageable age greatly outnumbered the number of available men. Also, with the freeing of the serfs in 1861, Russian intellectuals became much more interested in women's position in society. In 1869, this interest was further fuelled by two Russian translations of J S Mill's essay "The Subjection of Women.". The so called "woman question" was hotly debated in educated Russian society and the references to women's education and to women's rights in *Anna Karenina* are representative of the heated conversations of the time.

Beyond his intellectual interest in the "woman question," Tolstoy also had strong personal reasons for being interested in motherhood. Through his mother, his sister, and his wife Tolstoy was deeply aware of the costs and compromises of motherhood. He was only 18 months old when his

mother died, just weeks after giving birth to his sister Marya. Tolstoy and his sister grew up close to each other and remained so throughout their lives. Of particular relevance to the composition of *Anna Karenina*, in the mid 1860s Tolstoy was deeply involved in trying to help his sister obtain a divorce from her husband. The negotiations were complicated by the fact that Marya, along with the couple's three young children, was living with her lover in Algiers, and in 1863 gave birth to her lover's daughter, a daughter she was forced to leave behind when her lover abandoned her and she returned to her husband in Russia.

As for understanding motherhood through his wife, when *Anna Karenina* was published in 1878, Tolstoy was already father of 9 children. He and his wife would eventually have thirteen in all. In an 1870 diary entry, some time after the birth of their 4th child, his wife Sofia wrote: "*With each new child one sacrifices a little more of one's life and accepts an even heavier burden of anxieties and illnesses*" (*Diaries*, 38). In a later diary entry, she wrote:

"I was wondering today why there were no women writers, artists or composers of genius. It's because all the passion and abilities of an energetic woman are consumed by her family, love, her husband – and especially her children. Her other abilities are not developed, they remain embryonic and atrophy. When she has finished bearing

and educating her children her artistic needs awaken, but by then it's too late." (Diaries, 234)

Tolstoy and Sofia shared their diaries with each other, and many of Sofia's feelings and insights found their way into *Anna Karenina*.

In *Anna Karenina* Tolstoy created three strong, yet very different versions of motherhood. If insight into the lives of his mother, sister and wife helped him to create these versions, his characters are in no way programmatic. Tolstoy was not writing a roman a clef. Anna's struggles may owe something to Marya's, and Kitty's to the young Sofia's, yet for Tolstoy those biographical underpinnings are largely incidental. His primary interest is in understanding the complexities of motherhood. In Anna, you have a mother torn between self-realization, and love of her child. In Kitty, you have a young mother struggling to adapt to her changed identity and new responsibilities. Finally, in Dolly you have a mother overwhelmed by the demands of her role. Of the three, it is Dolly that I am going to focus on, if only because she is the one Virginia used as a template for Mrs. Ramsay.

When Vanessa Bell, Virginia's sister, first read *To the Lighthouse*, she wrote a letter to Virginia, which said, in part:

It seemed to me that in the first part of the book you have given a portrait of mother which is more like her to me than anything I could ever have conceived of as possible. It is almost painful to have her so raised from the dead. (Bell, Vol 2: 128)

Always remembering Mrs. Ramsay's other avatars, always remembering that "fifty pairs of eyes were not enough to get round that one woman with" (161), always remembering that for Virginia and Vanessa Mrs. Ramsay was also their mother, I want to think about Mrs. Ramsay as a deliberate revision of Dolly. Virginia calls attention to the parallel, both by having Mrs Ramsay and Paul refer *directly to Anna Karenina*, and also by carefully patterning the Beauf en Daube dinner on the central dinner in *Anna Karenina*, the dinner which is crowned with potage Marie Louise.

In *Anna Karenina*, Dolly is "not equal to the task of making the party mix" (401), whereas in *To the Lighthouse*, Mrs. Ramsay is responsible for the "merging and flowing and creating" (69) which makes a social success of the dinner. Mrs. Ramsay is a triumphant inversion of Dolly. Where Dolly is passive, Mrs. Ramsay is active. Where Dolly is weak and pathetic, Mrs. Ramsay is strong and heroic. Where Dolly is hesitant and uncertain, Mrs. Ramsay is firm and decisive. Where Dolly is overwhelmed by her responsibilities as wife, mother and angel of the house, Mrs. Ramsay is

calm and imperial. Again and again, Virginia shapes and presents Mrs. Ramsay as the deliberate antithesis of Dolly.

Tolstoy's picture of Dolly is an empathetic, even sympathetic one. We are made to feel the difficulty of her situation, and we see the unfairness of it. Stepan Oblonsky dumps all the hard work of parenting and domestic management onto her. He cares about his wife, but he is too self-centered, too much of a lazy egoist to actually help her in any meaningful way. He trades on his charm and lightheartedness and freely indulges in a hedonistic lifestyle at Dolly's expense. She, meanwhile, is exhausted and nearly crushed by the multiple burdens of her roles as wife, mother and household manager.

To some extent, Woolf's portrayal of Mrs. Ramsay is similar to Tolstoy's of Dolly. Mrs. Ramsay, too, is overloaded with her multiple burdens. In fact, Woolf gives Mrs. Ramsay an even heavier burden than the one born by Dolly. Like Julia Stephen, she has eight children instead of Dolly's six. Like Julia Stephen in London and St. Ives, she also takes on the responsibility of social work. She looks after the poor and the sick. She makes house calls. She also looks after the halt and the lame in the family friendship circle. There are hints of this nurturing role in Dolly—her matchmaking with respect to Kitty and Levin, and her efforts on Anna's behalf, for instance—but Dolly's activities are trivial compared to what Mrs.

Ramsay does to look after Mr. Bankes, Mr. Carmichael, Charles Tansley and all the others. Throughout *To the Lighthouse*, Mrs. Ramsay is superhuman in her nurturing activities, a transcendent embodiment of the Victorian “angel in the house.’

Mrs. Ramsay, though, is more than Dolly on steroids. Virginia Woolf’s conception of Mrs. Ramsay is fundamentally, radically different than that of Tolstoy’s conception of Dolly. What Woolf brings to Mrs. Ramsay and particularly to Mrs. Ramsay’s role as mother is agency. Unlike Dolly, Mrs. Ramsay is not a passive victim overwhelmed by fate and a socially determined role. Mrs. Ramsay is a powerful creative force and, if her situation is, in many ways, similar to Dolly’s, it is not because of helplessness. Mrs. Ramsay’s situation is a product of near sightedness and an inability to properly question the past and her role as mother. Nurturing and self-sacrificing she may be, but she is more than strong enough to cope with most physical, mental and emotional demands. She may suffer moments of intense fatigue and exhaustion, yet she is not overwhelmed by the burdens of motherhood. There is nothing in *To the Lighthouse* comparable to the following *Anna Karenina* passage:

“Yes, altogether,” thought Dolly, looking back over her whole existence during those fifteen years of her married life, “pregnancy, sickness, dullness of mind, indifference to everything, and most of

all—disfigurement. Kitty, young and pretty as she is, even Kitty has lost her looks; and I when I'm with child become hideous, I know it. The birth, the agony, the hideous agonies, that last moment ... then the nursing, the sleepless nights, the fearful pains..."

....

"And all this, what's it for? What is to come of it all? That I'm wasting my life, never having a moment's peace, either with child, or nursing a child, forever irritable, peevish, wretched myself and worrying others, repulsive to my husband, while the children are growing up unhappy, badly educated, and penniless." (634)

Unlike Dolly, Mrs. Ramsay never agonizes about her mothering. She may deplore the behaviour of her children, may question "strife, divisions, difference of opinion, prejudices, twisted into the very fibre of being," (11) but she is never at a loss in her parenting and she never doubts herself. Where Dolly has doubts about the efficacy of French instruction, and overreacts to the children's squirting milk and cooking raspberries over candles, Mrs. Ramsay is always sure and confident about her parenting. Even in moments of crisis, as in the nursery when Cam and James are at odds over the skull, she quickly and capably soothes her children and maintains calm control over the situation. Her actions are always swift and decisive, measured and controlled, confident and infallible. Everything

about her corresponds to Julia Stephen, as Virginia described her in her posthumously published biographical piece "Reminiscences":

Her intellectual gifts had always been those that find their closest expression in action; she had great clearness of insight, sound judgement, humour, and a power of grasping very quickly the real nature of someone's circumstances, and so arranging that the matter, whatever it was, fell into its true proportions at once. Sometimes with her natural impetuosity, she took in on herself to despatch difficulties with a high hand, like some commanding Empress. ("Reminiscences": 34-35)

Mrs Ramsay shares Julia Stephen's imperial qualities. Not for nothing do we see her "stand quite motionless for a moment against a picture of Queen Victoria wearing the blue ribbon of the Garter" (15). Not for nothing does Mr. Carmichael resist "her masterfulness, her positiveness, something matter-of-fact in her" (159). Lily remembers Mrs. Ramsay as a Canute-like figure saying "'Life stand still here'; Mrs. Ramsay making of the moment something permanent" (133). Mrs. Ramsay's imperial nature is manifest in the way in which she guides, directs and controls those around her. It is manifest in Lily's memory of "the astonishing power she had over one" (144). Where Dolly is impotent, Mrs. Ramsay is omnipotent.

To compare Mrs. Ramsay's shape to Dolly's is to recognize how subtly yet savagely Virginia Woolf indicts Mrs. Ramsay's mothering. Dolly is a tragic victim; weak, overburdened and just barely able to cope with the demands of motherhood. Mrs. Ramsay, on the other hand, is strong, forceful and misguided. Her parenting and her educational methods serve to prop up the existing sexist order. For instance, she imagines six year old James as "all red and ermine on the Bench or directing a stern and momentous enterprise in some crisis of public affairs" (7), and the Grimm fairytale she reads to him is deeply misogynist. After all, the moral of "The Fisherman and his Wife" is that if men do not control their wives tragedy will ensue.

As for the girls, while James is taught patriarchal values and is trained for public life, Mrs Ramsay's daughters are taught to be submissive to men. "Woe betide the girl — pray Heaven it was none of her daughters," thinks Mrs. Ramsay, who does not, like her, take "the whole of the other sex under her protection." It is only in silence that her daughters can "sport with infidel ideas which they had brewed for themselves of a life different from hers; in Paris, perhaps; a wilder life; not always taking care of some man or other" (9). In supporting men and masculine values, Mrs. Ramsay betrays her daughters, her sons, and all of society. Where Dolly is a weak and passive victim of societal injustice, Mrs. Ramsay, though powerful, actively sustains and perpetuates an unjust society. Her

mothering, triumphant as it seems, will eventually lead to the horrors of WWI; and to read *To the Lighthouse* against *Anna Karenina*, Mrs. Ramsay against Dolly, is to see how strongly Virginia Woolf questions and indicts prevailing models of motherhood.

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