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REVITALIZATION OR DECEPTION: *ANNA KARENINA'S CENTRAL CHARACTERS IN EUROPE*

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Abstract

While the poetics of space in Tolstoi's work has been extensively discussed, overseas travel in *Anna Karenina* remains largely unstudied. The significance of travel abroad should not be ignored, considering that all four of the novel's central characters visit Europe. Moreover, their overseas travels serve as counterpoints to one another. This article investigates these trips in an attempt to shed light on how the text's major characters experience Europe and how this experience shapes the novel artistically. To this end, Kiti's trip to Germany contrasts with Anna and Vronskii's sojourn in Italy as they take opposite directions in life. Whereas Kiti's experience in Germany helps her to grow as a person by coming to terms with her own virtues and shortcomings, Anna's quasi-honeymoon in Italy, where she basks in self-deception, only accelerates her moral decline. Petrov and Mikhailov, two Russian painters living abroad, play a role in this contrast. Unlike these travel story lines, the one surrounding Levin's trip to Europe stands out for its lack of concrete details, even though the event is significant and allows him to gain confidence in the realms of both existential and intellectual growth. Levin's "silent" tour of Europe contributes to establishing the contrapuntal parallelism in the novel.

Keywords: L.N. Tolstoi; '*Anna Karenina*'; Travel; Europe

The spatial dichotomy between city and country in Tolstoj's oeuvre has been widely acknowledged, leaving little room for debate. On the whole, Tolstoj's

utilization of space appears to reflect clearly the author's moral concerns. There is no doubt that Tolstoj prefers the country for its simplicity and the opportunity it provides to villagers for spiritual reinvigoration through active participation in labor. *Anna Karenina* certainly reflects this view and supplies ample evidence of this moral dynamic between city and countryside in the ongoing contrasts between the two capitals (Moscow and St. Petersburg)¹ and the two country estates (Levin's Pokrovskoe and Vronskij's Vozdvizhenskoe).² In addition, the theme of travel deserves our attention, as travel crosses different (at times oppositional) loci and thereby opens up a new semiotic field that invites our interpretation. Tolstoj masterfully utilizes the motif of travel, particularly railroad travel, to uncover the perils lurking behind the rapid development of technology.

It is striking that travel abroad, and more specifically travel to Europe, has received almost no attention in the scholarship on *Anna Karenina*. The cultural significance of Russians' travels to Europe cannot be overemphasized given the rich history of Russia's struggle to find her national identity vis-à-vis Europe. From the time of Peter the Great, who sent young Russian noblemen to the West, Russian history has been shaped by an arduous quest for a unique national path. Feelings about this quest have oscillated between resentment and an overblown sense of pride over Russia's self-proclaimed messianic role in the world. By the nineteenth century travel to Europe had become fairly commonplace among Russian intellectuals and noblemen and had naturally positioned them to convey their views on Europe and Russia. In the case of *Anna Karenina*, however, the theme of travel to Europe has been largely overlooked.

Liza Knapp's short overview of Tolstoj's treatment of setting in the novel is an exception to this general rule and therefore offers an apt point of departure here. In the section entitled "Locales: Russia and Beyond", Knapp succinctly characterizes the nature of the "trips away from the heartland of Russia" as "acts of desperation". She also notes that "Tolstoy's Russians abroad fail to find meaningful activity: what they do amounts to playacting, whether it is Kiti's attempt to imitate Varen'ka or Vronskij's posing as an artist." Knapp concludes her observation as follows: "the true heroes and heroines return to Russia anxious to begin or resume 'real life', which is impossible on foreign soil."³ Her discussion is, for the most part, perceptive.⁴ Yet given the thematic and structural significance of travel to Europe in the novel, the topic requires further elaboration. This paper is thus an attempt to address a scholarly gap and call attention to the importance of the theme of travel abroad for the novel as a whole.

All four of the central characters of *Anna Karenina* embark on a journey to Europe sometime in the course of the novel. Kiti's sojourn in Germany marks the first trip abroad in *Anna Karenina*, and her trip to Europe delineated in Part Two is followed by Levin's in Part Three. Anna and Vronskij

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