Natasha and Kitty at the Bedside: Care for the Dying in War and Peace and Anna Karenina

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This paper examines the sections of L. N. Tolstoy’s War and Peace and Anna Karenina, in which Prince Andrei and Nikolai Levin are dying. It proposes that, although scholarship has reflected instructively on what occurs to Prince Andrei and to Levin in these sections, it has not given due attention to the implications of these sections for the development of Natasha and Kitty, development, it is argued, that is linked to Tolstoy’s considerations of good care for the dying and the right type of love. This paper aims to redress this gap, exploring what comprises good care for the dying in these sections, placing that good care in the continuum of Tolstoy’s writing on who good care-givers are, and highlighting how Natasha’s and Kitty’s actions reveal development in them.

Keywords: care-giving, dying, Tolstoy, War and Peace, Anna Karenina

Death and dying appear throughout L. N. Tolstoy’s writing, arguably inclining most readers to agree with M. M. Bakhtin, who saw in Tolstoy’s works his ‘passion for depicting death’. This passion, however, is not limited to Tolstoy’s depicting the dying person’s point of view; Tolstoy also depicts death ‘from the outside looking in’, offering attitudes of caretakers and others who interact with the dying person and his death. In this sense dying and death in Tolstoy’s writing are often social events, and, as in most other social events in Tolstoy, some characters are comfortable in these death-bed situations and others are not; some know how to behave without thinking, and others agonize over what should be done; for some, dying is usual in life, and for others it is overwhelming, life-suspending.

When we discuss social aspects of dying in Tolstoy’s writing, we tend to go directly to Smert’ Ivana Il’icha (‘The Death of Ivan Il’ich’, 1886), and rich research devoted to this story has developed both in Tolstoy studies and in the medical humanities. Tolstoy’s use of structure in exploring the meaning of Ivan Il’ich’s dying (for him and other characters), his presentation of philosophical and psychological
developments that appear in Ivan Il’ich because of his interaction with others, and
the character and actions of the servant Gerasim, who appears to take remarkable
care of Ivan Il’ich, are some of the more considered topics related to social aspects
of dying in this story. But, as is noted above, dying appears throughout Tolstoy’s
writing. Perhaps most memorably Tolstoy explores the dying of Prince Andrei in
Voina i mir (War and Peace, 1869) and the effects on Levin when he is faced with the
dying of his brother Nikolai in Anna Karenina (1877).

Scholars have looked much less at social aspects of dying in these sections of War
and Peace (IV, 1, XV–XVI) and Anna Karenina (5, XVI–XX). They have reflected
instructively on what occurs to Prince Andrei and to Levin, but have provided
little work on the roles of others. In particular, we lack a sense of the meaning that
Natasha and Kitty bring to these scenes when they care for the men; there is a gap
in our appreciation for Tolstoy’s thinking on caring for the dying, as well as on
Natasha’s and Kitty’s development. In this paper I aim to redress this gap somewhat
by exploring Natasha’s and Kitty’s care-giving. Specifically, I am concerned with
identifying what comprises good caring for the dying in these sections, with placing
that good caring in the continuum of Tolstoy’s thinking on who good care-givers are,
and with highlighting how Natasha’s and Kitty’s actions reveal development in them.
Tolstoy carefully examines and connects these three points in these sections, affirming
Barbara Heldt’s instructive observation that, if ‘one examines Tolstoy’s women not
in isolation but in the context of the world they share with Tolstoy’s men, one finds
a web of interaction and common experience or responsibilities which is far more
intricate than many people have believed’. First, it will be helpful to establish what
good caring for the dying is in Tolstoy’s writing before War and Peace.

By the time of War and Peace Tolstoy has given social interaction with dying char-
acters critical attention in Detstvo (Childhood, 1852) and Tri smerti (‘Three Deaths’,
1859), where he reflects pointedly on ways to die, to interact with the dying person,
and to grieve. Already in Childhood Tolstoy wrestles with responses to the dying and
death of Nikolai’s mother, depicting a range of possibilities, but underscoring that
the servant Natal’ia Savishna’s ‘simplicity’ and ‘conviction’ (prostota, uverennost’)
are the most acceptable responses. Nikolai’s positive judgment is surely Tolstoy’s,
when Nikolai declares that the servant’s response to dying and death is the most
appropriate one: ‘for some reason or another I felt more in sympathy with Natalia
Savishna and to this day I am convinced that no one loved and mourned mamma so
truly and sincerely’ (tak iskrenno i chisto) (Tolstoy 1964, p. 101; Tolstoi 1960–1965,
1, p. 119). Care-giving is not a central issue for Tolstoy in Childhood, but he is
concerned with characters’ attitudes to dying and death, making clear that a ‘true’
and ‘sincere’ attitude is one that is neither self-centred, life-changing, nor demanding
on others; it is not self-conscious or concerned with how others might regard it; and
it accepts death as a natural event and thus does not compel individuals to extreme
or extraordinary actions.

Edward Wasiolek, in his reading of the dying of the noblewoman and the peasant
in ‘Three Deaths’, makes a convincing case for Tolstoy’s efforts to depict true ‘self-
absorption’ as a most productive way of interacting with the dying, and it is instruc-
tive to quote his conclusion here, for it draws attention to Tolstoy’s early thoughts
on positive unconscious self-absorption:
Tolstoy seems to be groping in this early and complicated story toward the perception that self-absorption, if it is truly that and not the absorption of others for self, permits others an existence undistorted and unmanipulated by the persons absorbed. The peasant can go on with his dying, and the cook with her cooking, but the doctor, husband, and relatives of the dying noblewoman cannot go on with their living — only with their grieving.

Tolstoy is beginning to perceive that grief, longing, fear, compassion are all claims on the world, and as such distortive of the world and manipulative of other people. Grief is a claim on the past and beings of others. The lives of those who surround the noblewoman are, for the time of her dying, suspended and fixated; they belong to her and to her dying. The lives of those who surround the peasant are undistorted by the dying and continue unrestricted in their independence and spontaneity.8

Tolstoy is concerned, Wasiolek underscores, with the possibility that living well in the face of death, or alongside someone who is dying, can mean living well for oneself, living within one’s needs and abilities, and living without expectation of recognition. At their core the right caring acts might not be generous or compassionate at all, though they surely are true and sincere. Good care-givers, such reasoning proposes, do not deny the truth of the situation and they do not assign it special significance. They also do not deny themselves or try to be something they cannot be. They are true to themselves and do not worry about how others view them. They remain independent and spontaneous.

For Tolstoy, in these early works some individuals regard dying and death appropriately, and others do not. Moreover, though Tolstoy clearly endorses good caring, he does not give all good care-givers the same concrete abilities or motivation. Childhood suggests that Natal’ia Savishna loves her mistress, yet her care-giving abilities develop as much — if not more — from her peasant simplicity and faith, as from her love. ‘Three Deaths’ underscores the rightness of the peasants’ frank acceptance of death, an attitude that will receive its fullest portrayal, of course, in the peasant Gerasim’s care-giving in ‘The Death of Ivan Il’ich’. The dying of others does not distort or manipulate their lives, to borrow Wasiolek’s words, and they respond to it in meaningful ways. Tolstoy continues to wrestle with these portrayals throughout his writing, and the sections in War and Peace and Anna Karenina that I will examine provide some of his most nuanced engagement with them. In the larger works he steps away from portraying peasants as care-givers, but continues to keep a true, sincere, and independent attitude to death at the forefront of good caring. The larger works allow Tolstoy to consider such caring in light of a character’s development, and thus not only to describe it, but also to explain it.9 In reaching toward these goals he works differently through the role of self-absorption, placing emphasis on types of love and the meaning of a good marriage.

In War and Peace and Anna Karenina Tolstoy seems concerned to express the possibility that non-peasant characters can be ready to care well for the dying. His starting point for Natasha and Kitty is their independent and straightforward attitudes, which he has developed in them prior to these sections. Alongside Prince Andrei’s and Levin’s mental and emotional searching, Natasha’s and Kitty’s behaviour is so seemingly direct and unconsidered by them that it appears as a physically natural response to Prince Andrei’s, Nikolai’s, and Levin’s conditions. They act
quietly and effectively without fuss, drawn by their love for Prince Andrei and Levin, and nothing crucial or critical in them or the dying men occurs in these sections. We see nothing in these relations, for instance, that resembles the impact that Gerasim’s care-giving has for Ivan Il’ich or that approximates the outcome that Vasili Andreich’s sacrifice has for Nikita in Khozjain i rabotnik (‘Master and Man’, 1895). Prince Andrei and Nikolai cannot be saved, their attitudes remain unchanged, and Natasha and Kitty behave within their characters. (Levin experiences something of a crisis at his brother’s bedside and then realizes ability in himself, but more of this shortly.) Tolstoy effectively makes these sections quiet ones that draw attention to the young women’s direct and independent interaction with the dying men and others who are nearby.

This section marks a turning point in Natasha’s development, as Tolstoy takes her — the book’s most self-absorbed character, consumed by her own existence in the moment — and challenges her to commit that moment to another character even though she knows that that character will die. Tolstoy proceeds gingerly. In her care-giving Natasha is not as busy as Kitty; she does not seem to do much. That is, Natasha’s care-giving involves little of the hands-on caring for Prince Andrei that Kitty provides for Nikolai (and Levin). Despite the narrator’s claim that Prince Andrei’s doctor ‘had to admit that he had not expected from a young lady either such firmness or such skill in looking after a wounded man’, we encounter hardly anything that reveals this skill in Natasha.\textsuperscript{10} If it happens, we do not learn about it directly. Tolstoy includes a plausible defence for Natasha. In the circumstances, Prince Andrei, because of his rank and station, most likely receives the best care that can be provided for him, and thus this aspect of his care-giving is out of her hands. None the less, Tolstoy offers telling examples of Natasha’s interaction with Prince Andrei that commend her potential capacity to care-give — her inaudible steps, her shielding him from the candlelight, and her catching her breath at the right moment so as not to disturb him. In these instances, Natasha is focused and at one with her environment — self-absorbed — as she so often is throughout the book. She is not as complete a care-giver as Kitty. Still, Tolstoy develops aspects in Natasha’s caring that anticipate her behaviour later in the book. This section is but a stage in her development as a care-giver.

Scholarship has not attended to Natasha’s care-giving in any instructive way. Most readers approach Natasha’s place in this famous section as Konstantin Leont’ev did in one of the earliest examinations of Tolstoy’s big books. In his famous essay (1890) on War and Peace and Anna Karenina, Leont’ev proposes that this section does not anticipate later events in War and Peace at all, let alone in Natasha’s actions in particular. For Leont’ev, Tolstoy does not connect Prince Andrei’s dying with the future goings-on of War and Peace. He is right, to be sure, that Prince Andrei’s inner thoughts and revelations do not affect other characters; they are inaccessible to Natasha and Princess Mar’ia. He is right also when he proposes that these scenes have no effect on whether Natasha and Pierre would marry — that is, Prince Andrei’s dying does not give Natasha and Pierre much, if any, pause, as they come together and then agree to marry. For Leont’ev, Prince Andrei’s dying provides scenes of remarkable artistic achievement, but scenes all the same that seem to be dangling, detached from any future development in the book. Prince Andrei dies, and that’s that. So why his pre-death reflections, why is Natasha with him in these last days?
Leont’ev writes, ‘Everything of importance that later happens to Natasha, Pierre, and Princess Marya could happen even if Prince Andrey had simply been killed outright [napoval], as in the case of Petya Rostov’. In this statement Leont’ev seems to have turned a blind eye to Natasha. For him — and most other commentators — Prince Andrei is the focal point of these scenes, and thus for him their level of importance depends on the extent to which Prince Andrei’s behaviour affects other characters and the remaining sections of War and Peace. Yet, what do Natasha’s actions in those moments with Prince Andrei reveal about her developing ability to care for others, about her readiness to embrace the responsibility of a loving relationship, and, perhaps, about Tolstoy’s concerns with caring for the dying? From this perspective might these brief scenes offer indications of Natasha’s growth that we come to appreciate more fully later in the book? There is much here to support such a reading, and the growth in Natasha is clarified chiefly because the scenes bring Prince Andrei and Natasha together.

Tolstoy displays Natasha’s caring for Prince Andrei in the midst of Prince Andrei’s last meditations on, and actions of, love, and thus he brings love to the forefront in these scenes. As much as these sections depict Prince Andrei’s wrestling to decide on what level he should love, and then coming to appreciate the inescapable power of death, they also express how Natasha can act and love in the face of death, and thus in the face of life. It is here where Tolstoy most determinedly takes Natasha from a character whose love is romantic and whose direction is unclear to a character who can love in Tolstoy’s most positive way — actively — and thus who can appreciate and attend to the everyday needs of the other. At its simplest level Natasha’s caregiving requires that she make Prince Andrei as comfortable as possible physically, emotionally, and psychologically. Her attending to his needs is how she lives and how she loves him at this time, and she focuses on the tasks directly before her. This caregiving situation is a new one for her, yet she throws herself into it, as she has thrown herself into such earlier tasks as dressing others before the ball and re-packing crates in Moscow. Her focus and energy turn to Prince Andrei directly, when he wakes, and Natasha loses herself in that interaction, as if becoming one with Prince Andrei:

Hearing this sound, Natasha put down the stocking, leaned in his direction, and suddenly, noticing his shining eyes, went over to him on light steps and bent down.

‘You’re not asleep?’
‘No, I’ve been looking at you for a long time; I felt [pochustvoval] it when you came in. No one ‘but you gives me that soft silence . . . that light. I want to weep for joy’.
Natasha moved closer to him. Her face beamed with rapturous joy.
‘Natasha, I love you too much. More than anything in the world’.
‘And I?’ She turned away for a moment. ‘Why too much?’ she asked.
‘Why too much? . . . Well, what do you think, what do you feel in your soul, in your whole soul — will I live? How does it seem to you?’
‘I’m sure of it, sure of it!’ Natasha almost cried out, taking both his hands in a passionate movement.

He was silent for a moment.
‘How good it would be!’ And, taking her hand, he kissed it.
Natasha was happy and excited; and she remembered at once that this was forbidden, that he needed peace [chteto nel’zia, chto emu nuzhno spokoistvie].
‘You didn’t sleep, though’, she said, suppressing her joy. ‘Try to fall asleep ... please’. He let go of her hand after pressing it, and she went over to the candle and sat down again in the same position. Twice she turned to glance at him, and his eyes shone meeting hers. She set to work on the stocking and said to herself that she would not look at him until it was finished (Tolstoy 2007, pp. 983–4; Tolstoi 1960–65, 7, pp. 73–74 — my adjustments to the translation).

Tolstoy emphasizes that this is a transitional moment in Natasha’s development when briefly he reveals the passion, happiness, and excitement that defined her previously. Until Prince Andrei speaks of how Natasha makes him feel, thoughts and feelings of ‘passionate’ love are distant for her, perhaps not real. As I note above, we have seen Natasha behave similarly throughout War and Peace, behaviour that underscores her tendency to give herself up fully to the task at hand, unaware, it seems, that other tasks or interests might exist outside the one that captures her attention and energy. Early in this scene ‘caring’ love directs her actions. But, Natasha cannot restrain her ‘rapturous joy’ at this moment, as she could not restrain her ‘joyful and rapturous shriek’ at the end of the hunt (Tolstoy 2007, p. 507). The moment at the hunt passes as the hunters prepare to leave for home, and in this later scene Natasha and Prince Andrei must return to the moment and the focus that it requires, so that he can have peace of mind. Natasha appreciates, more than she had in the early parts of the book, that actions can have significant consequences. She understands that she must pull back for Prince Andrei’s peace and comfort, and thus for her own peace and comfort. In such development of her energies and feelings Natasha reveals the extent to which she is at one with Prince Andrei. His need is her need at that moment. A remarkable aspect of her behaviour is the clarification that awareness brings to feeling in her. Her awareness enables her to move between feelings and expressions of different types of love. In order to direct her passion, so that she might care for Prince Andrei, she returns to her knitting.

In Natasha’s knitting Tolstoy identifies a symbolic act and links this scene to his earliest writing on care for the dying. Natasha’s work on the stocking recalls that of a namesake, Natal’ia Savishna, who knits at Nikolai’s mother’s bedside in Childhood. For Natal’ia Savishna this knitting reveals her continuing with everyday life as she attends to her dying mistress, and we can extend such an interpretation to Natasha’s knitting. Prince Andrei associates the knitting of stockings with ‘old nannies’, who, to his mind are the best care-givers, and Natasha picks up on his words and learns to knit (Tolstoy 2007, p. 983). In a short time, she can knit quickly. She takes Prince Andrei’s observation, acts on it, and makes the new action one of her usual habits as she cares for him. She takes to knitting as best she can, and the improvement in her knitting proposes an improvement in her caring, too. In addition, this attention to ordinary tasks anticipates the attention she gives to them in the book’s epilogue, as well as the attention Kitty gives to them at Nikolai’s bedside. Natasha might not act wholly intuitively in the way that she will in the book’s epilogue or in the way that Kitty does in Anna Karenina, but in this symbolic act Tolstoy proposes that her care-giving is developing positively.

We can take Gary Saul Morson’s observation on the ferry scene (and other scenes) in War and Peace, that the ‘finest moments’ in Prince Andrei’s life ‘are those times
when changes are revealed, not caused’, and propose that the ‘I love you too much’
scene, which is quoted above, is a fine moment for Natasha because of the change it
reveals in her.\textsuperscript{17} Certainly, on the one hand, she is unchanged. She is self-absorbed in
the tasks before her, and her self-absorption in these scenes is manifest in her oneness
with Prince Andrei. She makes his situation hers, as she does most situations that
involve her. On the other hand, in such behaviour Natasha makes what is right and
necessary for Prince Andrei also right and necessary for her. Her self-absorption
includes his well-being, and this is part of a change that is taking place in her. She
does what she must do at the very moment when caring love action is required. This
is not sacrifice on her part; rather, it is love that focuses on the person.\textsuperscript{18} Her inescap-
able need at that moment is to express this love for Prince Andrei as fully as she can,
and this expression takes form in caring for him. In part one of the epilogue, and
some seven years after she has cared for Prince Andrei, Natasha is absorbed in such
loving actions full-time.

To bring this section to a close, let us return to Leont’ev’s essay. As he reflects on
how \textit{War and Peace} might be different without Prince Andrei’s dying scenes, Leont’ev
offers, ‘True, Natasha would not have to ask forgiveness or to look after him [Prince
Andrei],’ and then he drops this point (Leontiev 1968, p. 299). He hits upon a telling
detail unknowingly. Tolstoy makes Natasha’s looking after Prince Andrei an impor-
tant indicator in her characterization, but we appreciate it more when we consider it
in perspective. When considered together, the three examples of Natasha’s active and
self-absorbed caring — for the soldiers leaving Moscow, for Prince Andrei, and for
her mother after Petia’s death — convince us of Natasha’s growing capacity to care
more fully than does each example individually. We might even chart a — perhaps,
too neat — trajectory in the demands and proximity of her caring that stretches from
strangers (the soldiers) to her first true love (Prince Andrei) to her mother. Indeed,
her own family, in which she will care with the maturity of a wife and mother, seems
the next most likely stage in this trajectory.

In the epilogue Tolstoy makes clear that it will take time, experiences in caring for
others, and a love developed in married life before Natasha will be able to become
absorbed in her family members, such that this self-absorption is at the same time the
fullest embodiment of her love for them. In \textit{Anna Karenina}, by the time Levin learns
that Nikolai is dying, Kitty has reached such a point in her life. She accompanies
Levin to care for Nikolai (and Levin) with greater preparation for such events than
Natasha had for caring for Prince Andrei. The two memorable paragraphs that open
5, XVIII of \textit{Anna Karenina} make Kitty’s abilities and responsibilities utterly clear.
The second paragraph, which compares her thoughts, feelings, and actions to Levin’s,
identifies the extent — almost complete — to which they contrast Levin’s. These
paragraphs underscore not only that she has what it takes to help Nikolai, but also
that she has her hands full with Levin. Thus, Tolstoy sets caring and love at the
centre of these sections.

In his depiction of Levin Tolstoy pulls no punches in displaying the incompetence
of this non-peasant male in the face of dying and death, and this incompetence brings
into focus Kitty’s impressive achievements. The context is strange for Levin, and the
first paragraph renders this strangeness from his perspective, drawing our senses to
the room’s atmosphere and Nikolai’s condition, emphasizing what Levin cannot do,
perhaps passing judgment on Levin (‘It did not even occur to him’ [Enu i v golovu ne prikhodilo podumati’]), describing his reasoned avoidance of action, making clear that this apparent reasoning is hurtful to Nikolai, and proposing that Levin’s ignorance, inability, and reasoning are sharply at odds with an unaccounted desire and need to be near Nikolai. Levin is frozen and mute, unable to be with his brother or overcome himself, so that he might act on the situation before him and the feelings within him. Levin cannot care for his brother; moreover, he burdens his dying brother with this shortcoming. Tolstoy itemizes this poor showing by Levin and reveals Levin’s seeming knowledge that it is poor, so that Kitty will save the day, which she does brilliantly on both counts. Tolstoy makes it clear that she is there to help both men.

Tolstoy also makes clear that Kitty achieves these results with simplicity and conviction, taking charge with independence and, at times, spontaneity. Kitty does as well as anyone might in helping Nikolai, and within a short time he admits to feeling better, and thanks Kitty as generously as he can with the suggestion, “I’m much better already,” he said. “With you I’d have recovered long ago. How nice! [Kak khorosho]” (Tolstoy 2001, p. 495; Tolstoy 1960–1965, 9, p. 75). In a short time Kitty has transformed Nikolai’s surroundings and made him feel more comfortable, cleaning, sending for the doctor and to the pharmacy, organizing what should be taken from and brought to his room, and arranging for Nikolai to be washed and dressed in clean clothes. As the narrator notes, ‘Those same details, the mere thought of which horrified her husband, at once attracted her attention’, and Kitty loses herself in this work, ‘paying no attention to the passing gentlemen she met’, the narrator stresses (Tolstoy 2001, p. 493, p. 494). Experience and learning help her greatly to make Nikolai more comfortable, and a variety of sources create in her these traits. Her father as an example of truth and generosity, her time with Varenka in Germany trying to help invalids, and her role, albeit brief, as the landlady of Levin’s estate are sources of generosity, skill, and leadership that likely shore up her caring for Nikolai. In addition, Kitty brings a combination of self-knowledge, compassion, and love, which she expresses without restraint or conscious consideration, and she draws on this collection of traits in caring for Levin as much as she does in caring for Nikolai. Finally, her loving marriage to Levin has brought her appreciation for how she must care for Nikolai.20

In his portrayal of Kitty in this section, Tolstoy clarifies the extent of her willingness and ability to love Levin. The fullest reflection of this love is her knowledge that she can and must help Nikolai. We do not appreciate the fullness of her abilities to help Nikolai and Levin until she has cared for them, and it is clear that Levin doesn’t either. From the moment she learns that Levin must go to his dying brother, Kitty must go — she cannot not go — with Levin, because, she offers, ‘I feel it’s my duty [dolg] to be with my husband when my husband is in distress [v gore]’ (Tolstoy 2001, p. 488; Tolstoi 1960–1965, 9, p. 66). Yet she is no tag-along. She understands what will be required in caring for Nikolai and in loving Levin, and she is willing to put in the work. She is committed to sharing Levin’s world.21 Indeed, she appreciates that she must care for Nikolai, both for Nikolai’s benefit and for Levin’s. Tolstoy makes her actions inseparable from her love for her husband; she cares for Nikolai, because she loves Levin, and this love embraces his entire being. In the short time that she has
been living with Levin, she has come to comprehend more fully his shortcomings and strengths, as well as his insincerity and sincerity, and she understands what she must do to support him and make their love strong. Kitty sees what needs to be done, understands it in her way, and responds accordingly. Thus, her sense of wifely duty, a duty whose responsibilities are developing all the time, is more complex than it appears on first glance. It is not simply that she believes that her place is alongside Levin. She is one with him because of marriage and because of her own need to love him as he needs to be loved. She asks Levin if she can go with him to Nikolai because she sees that he loves his brother and wants to help him, and she appreciates that he will not be able to help him as he would like. Levin understands none of this and mistakes the fullness of Kitty’s request. He misses the cues that reveal her love, perhaps because he is ignorant of her abilities, perhaps because he is arrogant before her. She wants nothing else but to satisfy her particular needs at that moment, and her needs are to help Levin fulfil his needs at that moment. She knows that she can help both men, if Levin will allow her, and finally, at the hotel, she expresses this directly: “Kostya, take me to him, it will be easier with two of us. Just take me there, take me, please, and leave,” she began. “You must understand that for me to see you and not see him is much harder. There I might perhaps be of use to you and to him. Please, let me!” (Tolstoy 2001, p. 492; Tolstoi 1960–1965, 9, p. 71). Her comment, ‘and leave’ [uidi], gives away her knowledge of Levin’s inabilities and expresses her need to act. She loves him by freeing him from suffering over what he cannot do, as well as from suffering over his dying brother. Indeed, as she prepares these words, she looks ‘timidly and pityingly’ [robko i zhalostno] at Levin, who has just returned from seeing his brother (Tolstoy 2001, p. 492; Tolstoi 1960–1965, 9, p. 71). This interaction is a preface of sorts to her fuller care-giving. Here Kitty knows what she must do and commits to doing it, all the while appreciating her need to respect and be generous to Levin. She acts with impressive compassion, loving Levin through his inabilities, his rashness, and his arrogance.

Readers sense, too, that Levin very likely will do nothing to comfort Nikolai, and one expects that Levin also knows this. Kitty’s active caring for Nikolai and loving her husband help Levin to care for his brother. Although Levin loves his brother and without hesitation feels he must go to Nikolai when he first learns that he is dying — Levin recognizes this act as happening at ‘such an important moment for me’ [v takuiu dlia menia vazhnuiu minutu] (Tolstoy 2001, p. 487; Tolstoi 1960–1965, 9, p. 66) — it is never clear that he has any sense of what he must or might do. Sure enough, at first in these scenes, Levin can do very little with Nikolai, except to bring Kitty to the hotel, even though for the first four hundred pages of the book he has been anticipating that he will need to help Nikolai. This inability might not surprise us. Throughout Anna Karenina Levin wrestles with enacting his ideas, impulses, and feelings. Whether he is going to declare marriage, to make reforms on his estate, to chase Veselovsky from his house, or to write his book on agriculture, he often strains to act without considerable reflection or restraint. In addition, throughout the book Levin has been unable to interact generously and openly with his brother. It is not that Levin does not love his brother, of course; we remember how, on seeing his brother, when Nikolai comes to Pokrovskoe, Levin spontaneously feels pity [zhalost’] for him (Tolstoy 2001, p. 346; Tolstoi 1960–1965, 8, p. 406). Perhaps he cannot
recapture their childhood closeness. In any case, when he gets to the hotel where Nikolai is dying, except to offer him his hand in greeting, Levin cannot touch Nikolai in order to care for him and does not know what to say to him. Unlike Kitty, he lacks learning about Nikolai’s state, about himself or what he can do in this situation, and about why it is worth doing. Even when he knows what he might like to do, he cannot do it. He cannot love his brother actively, and, like other non-peasant men, in Tolstoy’s view, he fears death and is ineffectual in the face of it, a point underscored when Nikolai is introduced in the novel.

At their first meeting in the novel, some 150 pages earlier, neither Nikolai nor Levin can talk about Nikolai’s impending death. The brothers come together because they love each other, but they struggle to act on that love. It is hard to disagree with Vladimir Alexandrov, who sees Levin and Nikolai as alienated from each other, but their interaction throughout the book is influenced by Nikolai’s impending death, and thus their alienation and incapacity must be understood in light of their impotence and fear before death. Their reactions are real, painful, and ineffectual. Levin lacks the learning, the confidence, and the freedom to make his love for Nikolai active so that he can care for his brother without restraint or fear. He lacks a sense of oneness with the situation. Yet, with time, with reflection, with Kitty’s example, and with a request from Kitty to turn Nikolai — and thus a situation in which he must do something, and therefore enact his impulses and ideas — Levin can, indeed must, help Nikolai:

‘On the other side’, she [Kitty] said to her husband, ‘he always sleeps on that side. Turn him, it’s unpleasant to call the servants. I can’t do it. Can you?’ she turned to Marya Nikolaevna.

‘I’m scared’, answered Marya Nikolaevna.

Frightening as it was for Levin to put his arms around that frightening body, to hold those places under the blanket that he did not want to know about, he yielded to his wife’s influence, made the resolute face she knew so well, put his arms under the blanket and took hold of him, but, in spite of his strength, he was amazed at the strange heaviness of those wasted limbs. As he turned him over, feeling an enormous, emaciated arm around his neck, Kitty quickly, inaudibly, turned the pillow over, plumped it up, and straightened the sick man’s head and his thin hair, again stuck to his temple.

The sick man kept his brother’s hand in his own. Levin felt that he wanted to do something with his hand and was drawing it somewhere. Levin yielded with a sinking heart. Yes, he drew it to his mouth and kissed it. Levin shook with sobs and, unable to get a word out, left the room (Tolstoy 2001, p. 495; Tolstoi 1960–1965, 9, p. 75).

Levin yields [poddavat’ sia, otdavat’ sia] to Kitty and to Nikolai, and in doing this he overcomes himself and gains greatly. He learns about himself and about what he can do for his brother, and he appreciates the rightness of those actions. From these results alone, Kitty’s request and thus her actions receive unqualified endorsement. She makes him touch his brother and move him without thinking of himself or the outcome of his actions — she makes him throw himself into these actions — and, in causing Levin to carry out her wishes and meet Nikolai’s needs for the first time, she brings to him understanding, confidence, and liberty to touch and care for Nikolai. Up to these moments, Levin cannot make the jump, cannot escape thoughts of his
own death, cannot give himself up to what his feelings and heart propose, and cannot unlearn all that has put distance between his earliest experiences with his brother and his present inabilities. Kitty’s caring for Nikolai and Levin helps her husband make this jump, if only for a short while. Her care-giving is not only an example of how one should care for the dying, it also is an edifying and loving catalyst that helps Levin to recapture some of the love that he feels he has for Nikolai, to act on his present feelings, and to appreciate the need to embrace life head-on, even when death — for himself and for another — is inescapable. On many levels Kitty overtakes these scenes and affects everyone positively, carrying out with impressive ability and love the very things — indeed, the only things — that she wants to do at these moments and that others need at these moments. In claiming these situations, she makes everyone feel remarkably better, and she does all this without creating discomfort to anyone. She is remarkably able and she loves her husband wholly and actively.

In this scene Tolstoy quietly draws attention to Mar’ia Nikolaevna, too. Why can’t she help? What causes her fear? Why does Tolstoy not permit her to care for Nikolai as Kitty does? We sense that she lacks the experience that helps Kitty in her care-giving, but might Tolstoy be making a point about a good marriage — that is, that Kitty’s good marriage with Levin, founded on active love (again, as opposed to passionate love), matures her such that she can care as well as anyone might expect? ‘To be sure’, Hugh McLean underscores, ‘Tolstoy carefully avoids any impression of aristocratic or moral snobbery in his depiction of Marya Nikolaevna’, yet Mar’ia Nikolaevna lacks the experience with such good love and such care-giving, and thus she lacks experience with the efforts that must go into them (McLean, p. 134). Marriage alone is not the wonder-event that transforms Kitty, but her ‘good’ marriage in Tolstoy’s view develops from a loving commitment to and oneness with Levin, and it brings maturity that enables her to care for Nikolai and Levin. It is no coincidence, perhaps, that, just before Levin reads the letter from Mar’ia Nikolaevna, telling him of Nikolai’s condition, he observes in the interaction of his wife and house servant Agaf’ia Nikolaevna that, ‘despite all the grief caused Agafya Mikhailovna by the new mistress, who had taken the reins of government from her, Kitty had still prevailed and made the old woman love her’ (Tolstoy 2001, p. 486). Thus, Tolstoy draws attention to Kitty’s capacity to get things done, to Kitty’s ability in winning over others to do things the ways she believes they should be done, and to Kitty’s creating the role of wife and estate mistress. In making a good loving marriage, she has made Levin’s life hers, and the scene with Agaf’ia Mikhailovna is a preface on a few levels to the scenes with Nikolai that will follow. Kitty, who had found Nikolai and Mar’ia Nikolaevna ‘highly disagreeable’ [v vysshei stepeni nepriiatny] in Soden, ‘because this was Konstantin’s brother’, now takes on Levin’s love for his brother wholeheartedly (Tolstoy 2001, p. 216; Tolstoi 1960–65, 8, p. 255). Mar’ia Nikolaevna might want to behave similarly to Kitty, but she fears Nikolai’s death, is unable to make his life hers, cannot act straightforwardly, and lacks the experience in loving and caring.

The point here (and with Natasha) is not to criticize Mar’ia Nikolaevna, but to note which non-peasant women are able to care for the dying and which are not. Kitty’s interaction with Nikolai and Levin distinguishes her care-giving abilities from those of the book’s other central women. We should see these sections as indications
of Kitty’s desire and ability to love Levin even in the most challenging times — to help support him when his thoughts seem rigidly focused, his emotions seem overwhelming, and his ability to act seems paralyzed. She helps him to do what he cannot do on his own, and she effects these actions without drawing attention to the likelihood that she did so consciously. In her essay on prosaics in *Anna Karenina*, Caryl Emerson describes Anna and Karenin’s post-Vronsky relationship in terms that allow us to contextualize and gauge the scope of Kitty’s efforts: Anna ‘ceases, and rather abruptly, to put in the work required to make the weak and ridiculous sides of a person one loves — in this case, Karenin — acceptable, understandable and dear, which is the primary work of love’s zone. Such work is transferred to Vronsky’. But this work, eventually, falls short, too. Kitty, however, embraces ‘love’s zone’ — its challenging, its mundane, and its exciting aspects — accepting Levin and the relationship to which they have committed and working hard to make their relationship a full and loving one.

Natasha also embraces ‘love’s zone’ as best she can, when she gives herself up to caring for Prince Andrei. Unlike the peasants, who care for the dying so well in other works by Tolstoy, she and Kitty care well for Prince Andrei and Nikolai because they are in loving relationships — Natasha with Prince Andrei, and Kitty with Levin. This love is manifest in the everyday habits of the young women, habits that define them in these sections of *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* because they are habits that grow out of their oneness with Prince Andrei and Levin. Indeed, their true, sincere, and accepting love for these men appears most distinctly in their true, sincere, and accepting attitudes to death — priorities, in Tolstoy’s world, for good caring for the dying. Natasha and Kitty cannot be anywhere but at the bedsides of these dying men, yet their lives are not ‘suspended and fixated’, to recall Wasiolk’s distinctions. It is not that grief or longing have claims on their worlds, but rather that their love motivates them to care for the ones who need it.

Notes

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Canadian Association of Slavists, which was held in Montreal 28-30 May 2010. I am grateful to colleagues who attended and discussed my presentation. I also am grateful to Caryl Emerson, who kindly read an early version of this paper and shared her comments with me. Finally, I am grateful for the advice of two anonymous reviewers for *Slavonica*.


E. Matlaw (ed.), Tolstoy’s Major Fiction (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967), p. 53. This piece is from Eikhenbaum’s Skvoz’ literaturu (1942). I acknowledge the importance of Eikhenbaum’s use of ‘seems’, noting that there are aspects that connect the dying scenes in the earlier works to those in War and Peace and Anna Karenina, as well as aspects that distinguish them.


My thinking in these sentences develops from Wasiolek’s discussion of the shifts in Natasha’s focus before the ball and at it (Wasiolek, p. 99).

Compare the Russian: В то же время Наташа, не переводя духа, радостью и восторженно вижала так пронзительно, что в ушах зазвенело (Толстой 1960–1965, 5, p. 290); Лишь ей сияло восторженно радостно (Толстой 1960–1965, 7, p. 73) — my emphasis.

John Bayley sees these moments as somewhat tragic ones. I am inclined to give Natasha greater appreciation for Prince Andrei’s state. See his Tolstoy and the Novel (New York: The Viking Press, 1966), p. 82.

R. F. Christian writes of the positive importance of sublimation of the self in War and Peace, identifying the young families in the epilogue as those who have taken on ‘the sober acceptance of family responsibility at the sacrifice to some extent of the uninhibited individual personality’ in his Tolstoy A Critical Introduction (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 151.


For a compelling discussion of Kitty’s love for Levin and her understanding ‘how to conduct a marriage in the right way’, see Morson 2007, pp. 68–75 (p. 75).

Barbara Heldt sees such sharing as a central feature of Anna Karenina: ‘For no matter how relentlessly Tolstoy divides and dissects the different social worlds of men and women, the two sexes seem in this novel to share whatever worlds are real to a greater extent than they ever had or would again in Tolstoy’s works’. The sharing of worlds and of feelings in these worlds is one reason Heldt sees Anna Karenina as a ‘crucial transitional’ work in Tolstoy’s writing (Heldt 1987, p. 42).

On Nikolai’s role in defining Levin, see Hugh McLean, ‘Truth in Dying’ in Hugh McLean (ed.), In
Tolstoy depicts Levin’s seeming awareness of Kitty’s ability to do these things, yet, despite his apparently respectful reflection on how both women resolve their domestic relationship and on Kitty’s effectiveness, in minutes Levin will be challenging Kitty’s motives in wanting to accompany him to see Nikolai. Tolstoy seems to hint at Levin’s ignorance or arrogance, when Kitty’s behaviour relates directly to him or to something he would not think of doing. On Levin’s personal motivations, despite his concern to be a better person, particularly the ‘disjunction’ in his actions ‘between ethical thought and ethical behavior’, see Alexandrov, pp. 246–50 (p. 249) — emphasis in the original.

I do not mean to say that Kitty and Levin are of one mind. I agree with C.J.G. Turner, who emphasizes that Kitty and Levin, though they do not share his interest in business, his philosophical views, or his intellectual curiosity, do share emotional ‘understanding and sympathy’. See C.J.G. Turner, ‘Blood is Thicker than Champagne: The Bonds of Kinship and the Marriage-Bond in Anna Karenina’ in Andrew Donskov and John Woodsworth (ed.), Lev Tolstoy and the Concept of Brotherhood (Ottawa: Legas, 1996), pp. 133–34.


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