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Why Can't Anna Wear Lilac?: Leo Tolstoy's Use of Lilac in *Anna Karenina*

Emily Turner

Leo Tolstoy opens *Anna Karenina* with the observation that, "All happy families resemble one another, but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way" (1). In this novel, Tolstoy expresses his distinct sense of right and wrong in regard to marriage and domestic life. Only those families that live correctly, according to his standards, are happy. Throughout *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy dresses characters in the color lilac to reveal whether or not they are happy in their domestic situations. Although the eponymous Anna goes to great lengths to try to secure the domestic situation that ensures her happiness, Tolstoy never allows her to wear lilac. Anna is not in a happy domestic situation, and does not attempt to mask her unhappiness; therefore, whereas other characters who possess or at least pretend to possess domestic happiness can wear lilac, she cannot.

Tolstoy uses the character Kitty, whose faithful marriage most closely conforms to his idea of a proper domestic situation, as an example of the type of woman who should wear lilac. During the early days of her marriage to Levin, Kitty wears a lilac dress because their domestic situation is the epitome of happiness. Levin observes, "She, in the dark lilac dress she had worn during the first days of her marriage and which was specially memorable and dear to him, sat with her embroidery on that same old leather-covered sofa which had stood in the study through his father's and grandfather's times" (439). Not only is Kitty wearing lilac, but she is also placed amongst the "old" furniture that predates Levin. This arrangement implies that Kitty, like the furniture, will be a lasting addition to Levin's domestic comfort. Kitty will be the mother of Levin's children, so it follows that she is at home among the pieces of furniture that have been passed down through generations in his family. Kitty wears lilac because she is faithful to her husband, as a young married woman who may soon start a family should be.

Tolstoy emphasizes Levin and Kitty's domestic happiness not only through Kitty's lilac dress, but also through the priest's vestments at their wedding. Kitty and Levin are not married during Lent, the

liturgical season during which lilac is usually worn. In fact, Tolstoy specifies, “the Princess [Kitty’s mother] eventually consented to have the wedding before Lent” (397). Therefore, Tolstoy must have chosen to dress the priest in “his purple surplice” (407) for another reason. Given the significance of Kitty’s own lilac dress, it is possible that the priest’s purple garment signifies that the union he presides over will be blessed with domestic happiness.

Earlier in the novel, Tolstoy allows socialite Baroness Shilton to wear lilac, despite her infidelity in marriage, to show that the Baroness does not believe her infidelity is inappropriate. When Vronsky returns to his flat in Moscow after first meeting Anna, he finds Baroness Shilton there with his friend Petritsky. Tolstoy narrates, “Petritsky’s friend, Baroness Shilton, with her rosy little face and flaxen hair, resplendent in lilac satin, sat at the round table making coffee, and like a canary was filling the whole room with her Parisian chatter” (103). Baroness Shilton fulfills the role that she feels suited for in a domestic setting—serving breakfast. In this respect, it makes sense that the Baroness wears lilac; she behaves and dresses as if Petritsky is her husband. However, Tolstoy writes, “‘Pierre, pass me the coffee,’ she said to Petritsky, whom, not concealing their relations, she addressed by the nickname of Pierre because of his surname” (104). Petritsky is not Baroness Shilton’s husband, but rather a man with whom she is having an affair. The Baroness experiences no shame about her relations with Petritsky, because she does not consider herself to have deviated from the path of what is proper for a married woman. She even complains of her husband, “‘You see how absurd it is, that because I am supposed to be unfaithful...he wished to have the use of my property’” (104). Tolstoy dresses Baroness Shilton in lilac to point to the changing morality of the time. The Baroness speaks with “Parisian”, or foreign phrasing, which suggests that her morals, like her language, might be imported from the European continent, which was growing increasingly untraditional at the time. The Baroness is comfortable wearing lilac, even though she commits adultery, because by her modern standard adultery no longer signifies domestic unrest.

Whereas the adulterous Baroness Shilton’s lilac dress demonstrates her acceptance of a modern morality, the faithful Princess Scherbatskaya, Kitty’s mother, wears lilac ribbons while abroad, during a particularly poignant moment of marital happiness, which demonstrates her adherence to tradition. Tolstoy describes, “Beneath the trembling shadow-circles of the leaves, at one end of a table covered

with a white cloth and set out with coffee-pot, bread, butter, cheese, and cold game, sat the Princess in a cap with lilac ribbons, handing out cups of coffee and sandwiches” (212). The Princess is content with her domestic situation at this point, so she wears lilac ribbons. Through the Princess, Tolstoy illustrates the opposite of Baroness Shilton. Princess Scherbatskaya, a Russian, wears lilac abroad whereas the Baroness, a foreigner, wears lilac in Russia. Tolstoy emphasizes how the Princess’ domestic happiness is distinctly Russian, “The Princess laughed at her husband for his Russian ways, but was livelier and brighter than she had ever been during her stay at the watering-place” (212). Thus, Tolstoy implies that traditional Russian morality of the Scherbatskys is different from that of the rest of Europe, which is quickly moving towards modernity. Whereas new European ideologies allow for adulterous behavior in domestic settings and assume that adultery is commonplace, truly happy Russian couples, like the Levins and the Scherbatskys, draw their happiness from their fidelity.

Tolstoy’s first mention of the color lilac occurs much earlier in *Anna Karenina*, through the voice of Kitty, then an innocent young woman who faithfully believes that her role model, Anna, should wear lilac. Kitty announces to Anna, “I imagine you at that ball in lilac!” (66). To this, Anna poses the question, “Why must it be lilac?” (67). From Kitty’s naive perspective, Anna seems to model what life is like for happily married women. Kitty expects Anna to live up to her reputation as a “Petersburg Society woman whom everybody admired so much” (65). However, Kitty finds that Anna is “not like a Society woman or the mother of an eight-year-old son” (65). There exists a discrepancy between the way society identifies Anna and the way Anna identifies herself. Tolstoy shows that Anna does not adhere to convention in terms of her behavior. Rather, she questions the societal expectation that as a wife and mother in a supposedly happy domestic situation she will wear lilac. This expectation, even about something as trivial as the color she plans to wear, limits her freedom; therefore, Anna questions it.

Anna does not wear lilac to the ball, because her honest personality does not allow her to feign domestic happiness. Kitty observes Anna at the ball: “Anna was not in lilac, the colour Kitty was so sure she ought to have worn, but in a low-necked black velvet dress which exposed her full shoulders and bosom that seemed carved out of old ivory, and her rounded arms with the very small hands” (72). Kitty, who was been

raised by the traditional Scherbatsky family, knows that Anna “ought” to have worn lilac. Anna’s choice of a black garment emphasizes her defiance of this societal expectation. Anna’s dress is “low-necked” and leaves, “exposed her full shoulders and bosom.” She does not try to appear as a married woman should in public; instead, she dresses seductively. Tolstoy does not condemn Anna for not wearing lilac as she “ought;” rather, he uses her inability to wear lilac to highlight a problem in Anna’s domestic situation.

Anna is comfortably married to Alexey Karenin, but there is something missing in their relationship. Kitty observes that Anna has a complex character and that she “lived in another, higher world full of complex poetic interests beyond Kitty’s reach” (65). Kitty also remembers, “the unpoetic appearance of Anna’s husband Alexey Karenin” (67). There is a disconnect between Anna and her husband that prevents Anna from wearing lilac. Tolstoy writes,

Kitty had been seeing Anna every day and was in love with her, and had always imagined her in lilac, but now seeing her in black, she felt that she had never before realized her full charm. She now saw her in a new and quite unexpected light. She now realized that Anna could not have worn lilac, and that her charm lay precisely in the fact that her personality always stood out from her dress, that her dress was never conspicuous on her.” (72)

Anna’s black dress, despite being inappropriate for a married woman and a mother, seems natural on her. The dress does not draw attention, for she is meant to wear it. Anna’s personality better fits the black dress of a free woman than the lilac dress of a committed one. Tolstoy does not condemn Anna by dressing her in black. Instead, he shows that she is unable to be happy in her marriage due to her “poetic” need for freedom, a need that her husband does not share. Whereas the Baroness Shilton wears lilac to mask her domestic troubles, Anna does not wear lilac because she does not try to hide her personality. She cannot wear lilac, because she is not happy in her marriage and cannot pretend to be. Tolstoy reserves lilac for those characters who fulfill their role in a successful family life, but Anna does not. Tolstoy does not antagonize Anna for her inability to serve as a perfect wife and mother, but all the same does dress her in lilac like other wives and mothers.

Kitty is not the only innocent figure in *Anna Karenina* to imagine Anna in lilac; Anna's son Serezha also believes that his mother should be dressed in this color. Anna leaves Karenin and Serezha while Serezha is still young, so Serezha remembers little about his mother. The boy only knows what his father tells him about Anna, so he imagines the rest. Tolstoy describes Serezha's thoughts about Anna:

Later on, when he accidentally heard from his nurse that she was not dead, his father and Lydia Ivanova explained that to him she was dead because she was bad (which he could not at all believe, for he loved her), he continued to look out for and wait for her. There had been a lady with a purple veil in the Summer Garden to-day whom he had watched with a sinking heart as she came toward him along the path. The lady did not come up to them and disappeared somewhere (476).

Serezha, like Kitty, loves the lilac-clad image of Anna that he has built up in his mind. Serezha envisions his mother in lilac, for this is the color of happy families. Serezha does not understand why his family is unhappy, because he is too young to comprehend his mother's infidelity. He loves Anna, and assumes she must be good because he loves her. Like any child, Serezha idealizes his mother. It is only in Serezha's imagination, which is biased by his filial love and his instruction in societal convention, that Anna is clothed in lilac.

The closest Anna comes to wearing lilac, or to domestic happiness with her husband, occurs when her midwife wears lilac ribbons during the birth of Vronsky's child. The midwife seems like a strange figure to wear lilac, since she helps Anna give birth to a child that was conceived illegitimately. However, as Anna's child is born, Anna and Karenin experience a rare moment of true marital happiness. Tolstoy writes of the midwife, "She approached Karenin, and with a familiarity bred by death's approach took him by the hand and led him toward the bedroom" (374). The midwife, wearing lilac, brings Karenin emotionally closer to his wife than he has been thus far in the novel. Because Anna is near death, Karenin is able to pity and love her. Tolstoy describes Karenin's emotions, "The perturbation in Karenin's soul went on increasing and reached a point where he gave up struggling against it. Suddenly he felt what he had taken for perturbation was on the contrary a blissful state of his soul, bringing him joy such as he had never before known" (376).

This moment of pity and love, brought about by the birth of Anna's child and represented by the midwife's lilac ribbons, is a brief moment of happiness in Anna and Karenin's marriage. For this one instant, the lilac ribbons of the midwife bestow marital happiness upon Anna and Karenin's relationship.

Anna should be able to wear lilac once she is happily settled with Vronsky despite her infidelity, as Baroness Shilton does; yet, at the end of the novel, Anna cannot honestly claim to be Vronsky's lilac-clad wife. During the final dispute between Anna and Vronsky, Vronsky receives a package from a "young girl in a lilac hat" (681). Tolstoy narrates Anna's actions,

As she passed through the drawing-room she heard a vehicle stop at the front door, and, looking out of the window, she saw a young girl in a lilac hat learning out of the carriage window and giving an order to the footman who was ringing at the front door...There he [Vronsky] was on the steps, without a hat, going down to the carriage. The young girl in the lilac hat handed him a parcel. Vronsky said something to her and "smiled. (681)"

This incident contributes to Anna's jealousy, because she cannot wear lilac as this young girl does. Whereas this girl still has a chance to achieve domestic happiness, Anna has done everything in her power to create a domestic life in which she can be both honest and happy, and has not succeeded. At this point, Anna sees lilac as a threat. The possibility that Vronsky could achieve true happiness with another woman who can wear a lilac dress undermines the stability Anna has given up so much to gain. Anna is aware that Vronsky's mother wishes him to enter into a proper marriage and, "this last jealousy tormented her more than anything else, especially since in an expansive moment he had carelessly told her that his mother understood him so little that she had tried to persuade him to marry the young Princess Sorokina" (669). Lilac signifies society's expectation of proper domestic life. According to society's definition of what is proper, Vronsky should marry a young woman and start a legitimate family. Vronsky cannot marry Anna because she has not divorced Karenin, so Anna fears Vronsky will succumb to social pressure and marry another woman. Anna cannot wear lilac, even when living as Vronsky's wife, because

her innate need to live honestly will not allow her to pretend her affair is a real marriage.

Why can Kitty, Baroness Shilton, Princess Scherbatskaya, the midwife, and the girl who gives Vronsky a package wear lilac, but Anna cannot? What is it that differentiates these women from Anna? Each lives a happy domestic life according to the expectations of society. Some, such as Kitty and her mother, adhere to the traditional set of societal values, and are happy because of their fidelity. Others, such as Baroness Shilton, adhere to modern European values, which are slowly being incorporated in Russian society, such as the expectation that a woman may have concealed extramarital affairs. Tolstoy allows all these women to wear lilac, but his heroine cannot. Whereas women who can wear lilac are able to fit societal expectations, Anna cannot wear lilac because she insists on living honestly and freely. Anna cannot conform to any expectations, either traditional or modern. Because she lives freely, she suffers. Thus, Tolstoy shows that the new, vogue morality of Europe which is making its way into Russia is just as confining and conducive to domestic unhappiness, if not more so, than the traditional morality of the old Russian families. Tolstoy reveals, through the women who wear lilac, that a successful marriage entails giving up the chance to live openly and freely as Anna does. Anna does not make this sacrifice. Because she can accept neither traditional nor modern expectations, Anna Karenina, can never wear lilac.

WORK CITED

Tolstoy, Leo. *Anna Karenina: backgrounds and sources, essays in criticism*. Trans. Aylmer Maude and Louise Maude. Ed. George Gibian. 2nd ed. New York: Norton, 1996. Print.

