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Evan Scollard

Trinity College, evan.scollard@trincoll.edu

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The Importance of Furniture in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*

Evan Scollard

A handful of old adages will claim that one can pass substantial judgment on a person solely on his possessions, whether those articles be clothes, shoes, pets, or some similar such thing. Indeed, what one claims ownership of and the condition of that property certainly tells a great deal beyond just tastes and stylistic preferences. In the case of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, the relationship of characters to their furniture—or even to any furniture they come in contact with, regardless of direct ownership—has the same revealing power. These interactions offer insight not only into the characters such as Stiva, Levin, Vronsky and Anna, but also into the complexities of their relationships to each other and their emotional condition.

Tables, for example, are communal in nature and therefore reflect the dynamic of the community that they service. Take the dinner-table that Oblonsky and Levin feast at in the French restaurant in the beginning of the novel, preceding Levin's failed proposal to Kitty. The simple, practical structure of the furniture is hidden beneath a brilliant white cloth and adorned superfluously with bronze, velvet, and expensive foods (Tolstoy 31). The whole set-up—inflated and unnecessary—comes from the high-class, urbane world with which Oblonsky is well-versed and Levin lacks familiarity. Stiva brings the country-gentleman to a place in line with his own affinity for opulence, and the fact that the table caters solely to Oblonsky's preferences symbolize his complete control. He is also conscious of the power he can derive from Levin's affection for Kitty. By wielding the prospect of marriage over him, Oblonsky is able to keep his friend at his mercy, which would explain why the rugged man from the countryside would even consent to dining so ostentatiously in the first place.

In the Scherbatsky home, immediately following Levin's failed proposal, the group discusses the supernatural realm and eventually calls to experiment with table turning, which incorporates furniture in a more unusual way (Tolstoy 49). Kitty fetches a table, highlighting the communal aspect of the spiritual endeavor by producing a group-oriented piece of furniture and magnifying the exclusion that Levin suffers. It is a recreational activity of popular culture, which he remains outside of in both the moment and in general. He literally

refuses himself a seat at the table, as he does not feel a sense of belonging to any of those in the drawing-room and is consequently uncomfortable being party to their little game. He is as reluctant to join as the Prince, who happens to be physically separated from the rest of the group for the majority of the narrative and is the only person present with whom Levin feels at ease. In this way, the experience of table-turning is a microcosm of the drawing-room's general social atmosphere. Levin excludes himself from the experiment and from the crowd just as the Prince's cold dismissiveness of Vronsky carries over from their greeting to their discussion of table-turning. He treats his daughter's suitor with controlled but apparent dislike as he enters the room, only to lambast outright his interest in the supernatural exercise (Tolstoy 49). Meanwhile the split between the victor and the loser—Vronsky and Levin—deepens as they defend opposing positions on the subject of spiritualism. All of Levin's awkward behavior culminates at this moment as he verbally trips over himself in the face of the charming and articulate Vronsky. In the end, the group never actually attempts the table-turning, but the conversation and planning yield significant insight into the complex nature of the relationships of those attending the small party—namely, that Levin stands on the fringe of their social interaction while the rest focus their attention on Vronsky.

In an instance a bit more grim, Karenin locks himself in his own house and sits at his "gigantic writing table, on which his valet had already lit six candles" (Tolstoy 258). Here, the coldly efficient statesman treats the matter of his crumbling marriage in the same calculated way he approaches matters of business, and in the same place that he does official writing—at his desk. He fills up the enormity of the massive piece of furniture with only his work, sacrificing the rest of the space to candles so that he may see it in the clearest light. He manages to strip the table of its communal nature and make it as lonely as the rest of his existence. In much the same way, he occupies the entirety of his life with professional matters and pays little attention to the distractions of emotional existence so that he might devote the whole of his attention to his job. Ultimately, it is Karenin's self-imposed exile from the emotional world that leaves Anna hungry for a more erotic love.

While tables often service a community, a sofa or a bed more often accommodates one or two people and is thus more reflective of a particular individual rather than of a relationship. Consider the very beginning of the novel, when Oblonsky is first introduced primarily in the context of his setting and through vivid aesthetic commentary. The detailed narrative of his physical circumstances, however, is nearly as personally-revealing as the character description that gradually accrues as the chapter goes on. In fact, the account begins with the plump and pampered Stiva rolling over his costly Moroccan leather sofa, to which he has been exiled for infidelity (Tolstoy 1). In a direct parallel to this furniture, Oblonsky exists in a state of maximized visual appeal and only basic practicality; he enjoys expensive dinners in his

perfectly tailored clothing and outwardly jovial manner, and proves himself moderately fecund at an unremarkable bureaucratic position. Though he has some functional value, he serves the purpose—like the sofa—of eliciting superficial, aesthetic pleasure. His behavior has stripped him of his right to his wife's bed, which is to say that he is barred from the intimacy of their marriage, and the relationship is therefore incomplete because of his own fault.

After Stiva's wife and children move away from him and into the country, a parallel narrative develops that confirms the degree of his hedonistic nature:

Like all guilty husbands Oblonsky was very anxious about his wife's comfort. So he looked over the house himself and gave orders to have everything done that seemed to him necessary. According to him it was necessary to reupholster the furniture with new cretonne, to put up curtains, make the garden tidy, plant flowers and build a bridge by the lake; but he forgot many other things which were essential, and thus caused Dolly a great deal of trouble (Tolstoy 236).

In his repeated focus on aesthetic appeal—revolving around the furniture—he also demonstrates significant negligence for genuine, reliable character. Oblonsky exists in a state of mismanaged priorities, in which he shows particular interest in the superficial elements of everything in his life, to the anguish of his family. His epicurean nature drives his wife and children away from him and into the country where they must make do with the little money that he hasn't squandered. Indeed, the narration confirms that "he had the tastes of a bachelor and understood no others" (Tolstoy 236). For Stiva, such superficial appeal overrides substantive worth, much to the detriment of his family. At least, however, they can take solace in the newly upholstered furniture as the rest of the house crumbles around them.

In the Karenin home, on the other hand, the mention of furniture subtly comments on the impending collapse of their marriage. When Anna returns from visiting Oblonsky and meeting Vronsky, she talks with her husband; and despite her internal struggle over her infatuation for Vronsky, she maintains the appearance of normalcy. Though her conscience is marked by a state of mental turmoil, she remains silent and reveals nothing to her husband. The narration does mention, however, that a bottle of water and a shaded candle had been left next to his armchair, which is meant only to accommodate a single person, suggesting that he is left to sustain himself alone (Tolstoy 102). On this isolating piece of furniture, the shaded candle burns in allusion to Anna's duplicity. She covers the illuminating power of the flame just as she hides the truth from even herself as she tries to pretend that nothing is the matter, mentally cataloguing why she should love her husband but failing to address that she does not.

When the affair comes to light and their marriage begins its degeneration, the attorney that Karenin hires to litigate his divorce considers the state of his own furniture at the end of the chapter, noting that he might as well allow the moths to eat away at his sofa; he will simply reupholster it with expensive velvet after the costly services that he is providing to the statesmen (Tolstoy 336). In this humorous example the lawyer's consideration of his furniture, coupled with his shiftless mannerisms, comment on his greedy nature. While Karenin suffers a tremendous blow, his hired counsel can hardly hide his excitement to cash in on the man's tragedy.

In the case of Nicholas's death, however, the imagery of furniture primarily augments the macabre account and comments on the circumstances of that immediate setting. Levin first encounters his brother in the filth of a cheap room at an inn as he awaits his passing: "In the dirty little room, its dado filthy with spittle, its partition too thin to exclude the sounds of voices, and its air impregnated by the stifling smell of impurities, on a bed drawn away from the wall lay a body covered with a blanket" (Tolstoy 446). Not only does the general foulness of the furniture reflect the horrible stench and grime of the man's festering illness, but the description of his body makes no distinction between dying and dead. So here he lies on a piece of rented furniture, preparing to pass on without being reserved the dignity to do so in his own bed. His sporadic, misdirected life begets a death that comes as crudely and roughshod, on furniture equally dirty and cheap.

In her first trip out to see Vronsky and Anna, Dolly observes, through the imagery of furniture, the plush interior of their new home. Though both come from old, landed, aristocratic families, they decorate the house in the same fashion that a newly rich individual might. The narrative fails to mention any old family heirlooms, antiques, or classical pieces—only expensive contemporary furniture, freshly purchased (Tolstoy 559). They have given up the vestiges of their old lives and replaced them with modern things that have no connection to the past that Anna is trying to escape. Much like the *nouveau riche* trying to assert their class, Anna and Vronsky put on a show in an attempt to demonstrate and prove their validity as a couple. But in both cases, the parties fall short; just as the newly rich can never compete in prestige with their historically well-off counterparts, the ill-fated lovers can never attain a legitimacy comparable to marriage.

A bit later, Dolly travels from the luxury of Vronsky and Anna's guest rooms and wanders to the nursery where she notes the same incredible display of newly-purchased, expensive furniture:

In the nursery the luxury noticeable in the rest of the house struck Dolly still more strongly. Here were perambulators ordered from England, an apparatus to teach a baby to walk, a specially constructed piece of furniture like a billiard-table for the

baby to crawl on, swings, and baths of a new special kind. All of these were English, strongly made, of good quality, and evidently very expensive (Tolstoy 560).

The struggling parents have set up a combination of furniture and contraptions to perfectly accommodate their daughter, perhaps to counteract the hostility that she will almost certainly encounter from society as a bastard child. Indeed, they have given her everything within their powers to give, because they cannot bestow upon her the one thing a child so desperately needs—a name. At the time of Anna's visit, the unfortunate child resides in a sort of limbo, with no certain identity and an illegitimate status. This societal characterization, along with contemporary nature of her furniture, alludes to the fact that she too will be unable to access any of her old, prestigious, moneyed ancestry. By the time she returns to her country estate, Dolly understands the misery of Anna's predicament, which no arrangement of housewares could possibly veil.

Levin, meanwhile, dwells in a home with furniture as new as his marriage, and in similar fashion he has yet to get used to living with either. All of his old belongings are gone—what one can imagine to be a sofa sunken by years of his reclined body, the washstand stained by thousands of his rinses, the portfolio worn by his constant handling—replaced by the recent purchases of his wife (Tolstoy 441). Here, amidst his brand-new houseware he feels disconnected from his previous existence and the productivity that he associated with that old life. Though also a product of his recent marriage, the furniture symbolizes the newness of it all and suggests Levin's difficulty in adjusting. At times, however, he manages to bridge the gap between his old life and his new one, such as when Kitty quietly embroiders on a particularly old sofa in his study (Tolstoy 439). In this instance, his new wife is on the literal seat of his past, adding to his existence rather than completely altering it. But Levin is so often prone to fluctuation that whatever perspective he chooses to take up is dependent on his mood and subject to sudden change; what may at one moment satisfy him can, in just an instant, become foreign and repulsive, and in the case of his recent marriage is represented by his living room and the furniture that surrounds him.

Even previous to his struggles with married life, Levin shows a special connection to his furniture and, by extension, his past. As he travels back to his estate he contemplates on his short-comings and confronts his desire to direct himself towards positive change. He promises to temper his passions, resign from his dependence on marriage for happiness, take better care of his brother, and to put more stock into the present (Tolstoy 85). He entertains his optimistic planning all the way until he reaches his living room:

A candle just brought in gradually lit up the study and its familiar details became visible: the stag's horns, the book-shelves, the looking-glass, the hot-air aperture of the stove with its brass lid,

which had long been in need of repair, his father's couch, the large table on which were an open volume, a broken ash-tray, and an exercise-book in his handwriting. When he saw all this, he was overcome by a momentary doubt of the possibility of starting the new life of which he had been dreaming on his way (Tolstoy 85).

Here, surrounded by the vestiges of the old life in which he has become so comfortable, his plans of reinvention crumble and he weighs the tremendous effort it would take to commit himself to improvement. In the amenity of the familiar environment, his earlier desires lose their potency and he seems less resentful of his past self—growingly accordingly content to remain the same old bachelor on his country estate.

The symbolism of furniture even sneaks itself into the pivotal scene immediately preceding Anna's gruesome suicide. As her frantic thoughts wind and twist their way through her fragmented consciousness, she sits alone watching the travelers pass by, just as she has sat excluded from the rest of the world since her estrangement. It is the shape of the sofa, however, that calls for particular scrutiny. She is, after all, seated on a physical representation of a star—the sign of the cosmos. Any reference to the heavens suggests a commentary on fate, which is so often associated with movement and placement of the celestial bodies. In this instance she rests on the symbol of her fate and feels the full weight of its consequence as she is brought to the point of deterioration. The allusion to a higher power suggests that events beyond her control—such as her instinctual love for Vronsky and hatred for Karenin—force her onto a path that leads to inevitable demise. Her maker imbibed her with natural inclinations that influence her decision-making in such a way that she becomes self-destructive. It is also important to note that she alone occupies the sofa, though Vronsky was complicit in her misfortune; he, however, has escaped the tragic hand of destiny. His creator gifted him with a social positioning that allows him to recover from the episode, both socially and in regards to his status. The illicit affair levies an unequal expense on the lovers; Anna suffers the greatest loss and pays the greatest price, while he walks away from its demise with full potential to begin his life anew, leaving her alone on the star-shaped sofa.

The narration incorporates numerous references to furniture over the course of the novel, and in many instances they are supplementary—and sometimes even crucial—to the architecture of the major plot points or character development, such as in the case of Levin's transition to married life. But it is important to make the distinction between different furniture items and their symbolism. A table, for example, is associated more often with complex relationships of multiple characters, while a bed, sofa, or chair are more singularly focused and often revolve around one person. In any instance, the presence of these pieces of houseware offers clarifying insight for

the interplay of characters, their development, and ultimately a greater depth of exploration into the novel that begins and ends on a sofa.

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