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**TRIPTYCH OF LOVE IN ANNA KARENINA:  
INTERPRETING ANNA'S LOVE(S) PSYCHOANALYTICALLY**  
**ТРИПТИХ ЛЮБВИ В «АННЕ КАРЕНИНОЙ»:  
ПСИХОАНАЛИТИЧЕСКАЯ ИНТЕРПРЕТАЦИЯ ЛЮБОВ(ЕЙ) АННЫ**

This paper explores Anna Karenina's multifaceted love(s) towards three men – her son, her husband, and her lover – using psychoanalytic perspective. While Joe Wright's film adaptation (2012) serves as the primary object of analysis, the paper also draws upon the source text by Leo Tolstoy. The essay demonstrates ways in which psychoanalytic theory may be deployed to understand Anna's motivations. Specifically, it suggests interpreting Anna's love decisions in terms of what Freud called a love versus desire divide, originally attributed to men. As analysis shows, Anna seeks love and desire in two separate male figures, with Karenin being more like a father to her, and Vronsky – a sexual object or a “bad boy,” to use Bruce Fink's term. Anna thinks in terms of “exchange” not of her husband's but of her son's love for that of Vronsky, thereby equating those seemingly different love(s). The paper looks closely at the specific scenes as well as stylistic techniques such as a whip pan, close-up, point-of-view shot, etc., which shed light onto Anna's psychological conflict.

**Keywords:** Anna Karenina, Tolstoy, adaptation, psychoanalysis, Freud, love versus desire divide, anaclitic object-choice, narcissistic object-choice

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В статье исследуется многогранная любовь Анны Карениной к трем мужчинам – ее сыну, мужу и любовнику – сквозь призму психоанализа. В то время как основным объектом анализа служит экранизация Джо Райта (2012), в статье также делаются отсылки на исходный текст Льва Толстого. В статье демонстрируется, как психоаналитическая теория может быть использована для понимания мотиваций Анны. В частности, интерпретируются любовные решения Анны с точки зрения того, что Фрейд называл разрывом между любовью и желанием (a love versus desire divide), первоначально приписываемом мужчинам. Как показывает анализ, Анна ищет любви и страсти в двух отдельных мужских фигурах: Каренин воплощает для нее отца, а Вронский – сексуальный объект или «плохого мальчика», если использовать термин Брюса Финка. Анна мыслит в терминах «обмена» не любовью своего мужа, а любовью своего сына на любовь Вронского, тем самым приравнивая разные модальности любви. В статье подробно рассматриваются сцены, а также стилистические приемы, такие как whip pan, close-up, point-of-view shot и др., которые проливают свет на психологический конфликт Анны.

**Ключевые слова:** Анна Каренина, Толстой, экранизация, психоанализ, Фрейд, анаклитический выбор объекта, нарциссический выбор объекта

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In this essay, I will meditate upon different modalities of love and compare them on the example of Joe Wright's adaptation of *Anna Karenina* (2012), with references to the source text written by Leo Tolstoy. Specifically, I will consider Anna's multifaceted love(s) towards three men in her life – her son, her husband, and her lover – that she tries to maintain at once, and interpret them through the psychoanalytic lens, drawing upon Sigmund Freud, Bruce Fink, and other authors. Anna is often said to be a projection of Tolstoy's own repudiated sexual passion or a sort of surrogate through which he explores his own longing for death and from whom he eventually recoils “as from a thing of horror” [Armstrong, 1988, p. 137]. What I will endeavor to do here is explore Anna's decisions on the matters of love as informed by her psychic experiences, focusing on those plot twists that seemed unmotivated or weak to some scholars but are nonetheless to be construed by psychoanalytic theory.

While the Lacanian film theory is applied in film studies more often than any other psychoanalytical theory, the theme of spectatorship, or, more specifically, the notion of a gaze of mastery with which the spec-

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tator identifies her/himself [McGowan, 2003], does not fall within the scope of this paper, though I do refer to Mulvey and her 'male gaze' but only in the context of the on-screen world. What I am interested in is the diegetic level of the filmic (and literary) story, that is, the level of characters, as well as their thoughts and interweavings. Freud's theory seems to be better equipped to explain some of Anna's motivations. As regards the choice of Wright's adaptation, it lies in its psychoanalysis-inviting portrayal of Anna. Wright's Anna, with her emotional excess and instability [Pietrzak-Franger, 2015], most successfully embodies Tolstoy's heroine. Earlier versions of Anna seem to be more cautious and less reckless instead. Anna played by Greta Garbo (1935), for instance, is said to be mature and aware of the fact that she is in the wrong; she feels responsible to her husband and son [ibid, p. 248].

Freud used to claim that where a man desires, he does not love, meaning that he usually feels love for "the right kind of woman" and sexual desire – for "the wrong kind of woman," and these two (love and desire) cannot converge in one woman [Fink, 2016, p. 23-24]. As Fink notices, although Freud did not think of women in the context of a love/desire divide, he nonetheless acknowledged that "all is not perfect in the realm of women's desire... women often need there to be a prohibition or "forbiddenness" to get sexually aroused" [ibid, p. 28]. In this sense, Anna's sexual desire for Vronsky might stem from the very 'prohibition' that society imposes on her relationship with him. This societal non-acceptance seems to fuel Anna's passion for Vronsky, which at some point becomes unbearable for him. The more she is rejected by society, the more she is attached to him. This dynamic is artfully expressed in the movie through the whip pan technique. In the ball scene, the camera's aggressive movements from the medium shots of Anna and Vronsky dancing to the close-ups of the aristocrats expressing disapproval with their looks vividly showcase the brewing conflict between Anna and society, and at the same time Anna's increasing partiality for Vronsky (*fig. 1-2*). Her persistence in continuing to attend public events with him, though it is forbidden, and society openly despises them (her), may be also explained by her being sexually aroused by it. Otherwise, why would she torture herself and him like that? Freud assumed that "some obstacle is necessary to swell the tide of libido to its height; and at all periods of history, wherever natural barriers in the way of satisfaction have not sufficed, man has erected conventional ones in order to enjoy love" [Freud, 1997, p. 57]. While a ban on the publicly displayed extramarital affair was an artificial "obstacle" (established by society), so was Anna's refusal to divorce her husband Karenin. Judith M. Armstrong refers to the latter as the weakest point in the novel, as Tolstoy did not give any convincing motivation that prompted Anna to do so [Armstrong, 1988, p. 98]. However, it is pertinent to interpret Anna's refusal as yet another self-imposed obstacle, which seemed to stimulate and nourish a more passionate and rebellious love between the two, or at least on the part of Anna. The thing is that she does not want her affair with Vronsky to be smooth, right and lawful, something needs to be inappropriate or unfinished there in order to excite her.



Fig. 1.

Anna and Vronsky dancing (the ball scene), film still from *Anna Karenina*, 2012.



Fig. 2.

Aristocrats looking with disapproval at Anna and Vronsky dancing, film still from *Anna Karenina*, 2012.

Perhaps, marrying Vronsky meant a certain point of stagnation or ‘arrival’ to Anna, as there would be nowhere else to go and nothing else to strive for. This echoes with the ancient line of thought to which Laplanche attributes Freud’s position, namely that “man prefers the hunt to the capture (or perhaps that to travel hopefully is better than to arrive)” wherein the fantasy of capture is cherished more than the capture itself [Armstrong, 1988, p. 99]. Armstrong describes Vronsky’s attitude to Anna as that of the hunter towards his capture-to-be, and when Anna is about to die, he feels “like an unworthy and beaten opponent for whom the goal is decisively out of reach, he can no longer sustain the fantasy of capture,” hence his suicide attempt [ibid, p. 99]. But this hunter-capture relation equally applies to Anna who does not desire to see Vronsky as her husband, that is, her “capture” or ultimate aim, and chooses instead to be “on the hunt” and nurture a fantasy. In the paragraphs that follow, I will discuss Anna’s decision not to divorce in terms of a love/desire divide.

While Freud attributes a love/desire divide only to men, Fink talks of the so-called “bad-boy phenomenon,” suggesting that the divide is not exclusively male but also manifests itself in women. Women are said to be fascinated with bad boys (e.g., “insolent soldiers with mustaches”) who “do not fit the mold of their own idealized father figures” and “take liberties with them instead of showing them consideration” [Fink, 2016, p. 25-26]. As Fink underlines, what a woman experiences towards such a man is a sexual desire, not love [ibid, p. 27]. Love is what she feels towards her father instead, who always treats her as a princess, in a tender and delicate manner. Hence a woman follows the same logic as a man, seeking love and desire in two separate male figures. Yet if a bad boy starts professing love for a woman, she will likely debase him (the word which Freud uses) so as to continue perceiving him only sexually [ibid, p. 27]. She is only thrilled by a bad boy’s desire for her, whereas the signs of love on his part make her feel as if it were her father whom she can only love, not desire.

Anna’s relationship with Vronsky is similar to that with a bad boy described above. With his handsome appearance, Vronsky seems to seduce Anna easily, setting her up to drop everything and be with him. Her sexual desire for / attraction to him is shown in the film through point-of-view shots, displaying how she gazes at him. In the ball scene, shortly before their dance, Anna is looking at Vronsky who stands on the balcony with his friends (*fig. 3*). When she turns her gaze once more to the balcony, he is no longer there (he comes to her). While the gaze is usually a male prerogative, and it is women who “are simultaneously looked at and displayed [in the diegesis], with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact,” according to Laura Mulvey, this dynamic seems to be inverted here [Mulvey, 2009, p. 436]. It is Anna who occupies the position of a bearer of the look, whereas Vronsky is the one who is sexually objectified. Anna’s tendency for objectification is also conveyed through her unwillingness to let him go, as if he belonged to her (as a thing). She seems to compete with him for dominance in their relationship – a trait inherent rather in men than in women. In the novel, both of her “habits” are implied in the following expressions: “her complete possession of him was a constant joy to her,” “had once again taken full posses-

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sion of him,” “could not submit to him,” “the one thing that meant anything was punishing him” [Tolstoy, 2014, p. 425, 609, 676, 683]. Armstrong categorizes Anna as a ‘hero’ in the sense that Yuri Lotman attaches to it: she transgresses boundaries of her gender, she is mobile and active (not fixed and passive), and she makes her own choice of a person with whom to live “instead of simply being given in marriage” [Armstrong, 1988, p. 118]. While Kitty is depicted only as an object of Levin’s desire, and her own feelings for him are not so pronounced, Anna, in contrast, both *desires* Vronsky (as subject) and is desired by him (as object) [ibid, p. 121]. “Tolstoy,” Armstrong says, “allows Anna one supremely ‘male’ activity: he endows her with pen... She does not remain the reader figure depicted in the early chapters, the train-passenger who finds it hard to concentrate on what is being recounted in her English novel because she so longs ‘to do it herself’” [ibid, p. 122]. Thus, she not only reads but also writes; is not only chosen but also chooses herself.



Fig. 3.

Anna looking at Vronsky (the ball scene), film still from *Anna Karenina*, 2012.

Amy Mandelker considers both Levin and Anna as artist figures who seek to frame and compose their ideas about the self and life in accordance with artistic models [Mandelker, 1991, p. 4]. However, in her own ‘self-portraits,’ Anna appears as a mere art object “meant to be admired and desired for its beauty alone,” with her first and last public appearances (the Moscow ball and the Petersburg opera) being the most vivid examples [ibid, p. 9]. It is contrasted in the novel with Levin’s “painterly visions of the world” indicative of his spiritual growth, as Mandelker points out [ibid, p. 9]. It’s not by chance that Tolstoy uses the metaphor of frame while describing Anna’s attire for the ball (and subsequently for the opera): “The black dress with the luxurious lace was not conspicuous; it was merely a frame, and she was all one saw” [Tolstoy, 2014, p. 75]. Her attire, therefore, serves as nothing more than a framing device, from which her face, the artwork itself, is meant to stand out and attract the eyes of others. Anna renders herself a visual object in Mulvey’s sense, while simultaneously assuming masculine inclinations. Curiously enough, the portrait of Anna by Mikhailov which Levin contemplates and cannot tear himself from is said to be “not a picture, but a splendid, living woman... who looked at him triumphantly and tenderly with disarming eyes,” alluding to its lifelike quality [ibid, p. 634]. There seems to be a contradiction here, as the real Anna concedes in vivacity to the portrait of her. What is noteworthy, the film makes frequent use of tableaux vivants, referring to the prominent paintings such as Monet’s *Woman with a Parasol* or Caravaggio’s *Medusa*, of which Anna is the heroine (fig. 4-5). Anna in those scenes not figuratively but quite literally becomes an art object, inviting what usually a painting invites – a look. Allusions to art may also be seen in the technique of internal framing that the film employs. Particularly interesting is the shot of Anna lying in bed with her son Seryozha (fig. 6). This scene follows Anna’s return from Moscow, where she got acquainted with Vronsky. Anna and Seryozha are placed in a frame, and the overall feeling is that of seeing a painting.

It is worth noting that when Vronsky’s feelings for Anna become calmer and more akin to love rather than passion, and they are about to become a family, a married couple, she seems to be backing away from that.



Fig. 4.  
Anna with a parasol walking through the meadow, film still from *Anna Karenina*, 2012.



Fig. 5.  
Anna in bed with a fever after delivery, film still from *Anna Karenina*, 2012.



Fig. 6.  
Anna lying in bed with her son Seryozha (internal framing), film still from *Anna Karenina*, 2012.

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What Anna wants and demands from Vronsky is an endless passion. In psychoanalytic terms, she is ready to perceive him only as a bad boy or as a sexual object, but not as a life partner. Accordingly, she is ready to be only a mistress for Vronsky, not a wife, as can be seen from her inner reflections in the novel: "If I could only be something other than his mistress passionately loving his caresses alone; but I can't and don't want to be anything else" [Tolstoy, 2014, p. 694]. Armstrong's juxtaposition is illuminating: "The difference between Levin – whose story is after all a tale of love, courtship and marriage – and Anna, who pursues passion and death, is similar to the difference between the 'more mediated, represented, mastered form of sexuality'... and its raw, unsublimated, unmastered counterpart" [Armstrong, 1988, p. 128-129]. Because Anna's passion is unsublimated, that is, not redirected onto the creative / constructive activities, and she continues to be fixated upon this passion, it is destructive, it kills her eventually. In this sense, it is even more curious that she hesitates to divorce Karenin when it is finally possible, and the only thing needed is her urge. Karenin is a kind of father figure for Anna, he is much older than she and continues to bestow his love on her sacrificially even when she does crazy things (e.g., asks both Karenin and Vronsky to be near her bed during the prenatal fever and forgive each other). His love towards Anna also may be interpreted as that of the lover to the beloved in the Greek tradition "where many men were far more concerned with expressing their love and desire for someone than with having their love reciprocated," "it was intensity of their own love that seems to have made them alive" [Fink, 2016, p. 42-43]. Karenin's sanctity is stylistically conveyed in the final scene, where he is sitting in the middle of an endless meadow peacefully and contemplating the play of his children (Seryozha and Anya, Vronsky's daughter). The fact that the entire film except for a few scenes is set in a theater renders this scene even more important and suggestive. The closed space of the theater is finally open, and life is breathed into it: grass has 'sprouted' in the audience hall and on the stage, and behind the scenes, a view of the meadow opens up. But is it Anna's death that produced such peace and tranquility in her family?

What is also noteworthy is that Anna tries to play two incompatible roles simultaneously: she is a devoted (holy) mother to Seryozha and a mistress who gets sexual pleasure from extramarital activity. The holiness of her connection with Seryozha is implied in the motif of Madonna and Child that the film makes use of in the beginning [Pietrzak-Franger, 2015, p. 245]. In being with Vronsky, Anna seems to 'cheat on' her son in the first place, not her husband Karenin. As it is suggested in the novel, Anna thinks in terms of "exchange" not of Karenin's but of Seryozha's love for that of Vronsky, thereby equating those seemingly different love(s): "I too thought that I loved him [Seryozha], and I was moved by my own tenderness. But I have lived without him. I exchanged his [Seryozha's] for another love and did not complain of this exchange so long as I was satisfied with that love" [Tolstoy, 2014, p. 694]. From the psychoanalytical point of view, the tenderness with which she treats Seryozha might have sexual currents in it. Freud alluded to the mother's ignorance of the sexual element present in her treatment of a child. Mother, he says, "regards him [the baby] with feelings that are derived from her own sexual life: she strokes him, kisses him, rocks him and quite clearly treats him as a substitute for a complete sexual object...She regards what she does as asexual, 'pure' love" [Freud, 1962, p. 89]. There is something (unconsciously) sexual in the way Anna strokes Seryozha, while lying with him in bed. The camera dwells on Anna's caressing hand for a while (*fig. 7*). As the scene happens after her acquaintance and infatuation with Vronsky, she seems to ponder over that idea of possible 'exchange' and feel guilty before Seryozha. The scene where Anna with her son appear on a bare stage breaks with the holy image of Madonna and Child, suggesting that her behavior is "incompatible with the moral ideals that the Mother and Child iconography stands for," as Monika Pietrzak-Franger underscores [Pietrzak-Franger, 2015, p. 245]. The film literally visualizes the mother's (Anna's) transition from Madonna, pure and faithful, to the mistress-betrayer that Freud is talking about [Fink, 2016, p. 20].

Returning to the idea of exchange, it is worth considering Armstrong's parallel drawn between what Freud calls anaclitic or 'function-love' and narcissistic love and what it is that Anna chooses out of these two. The concepts are related to the selection of a love object wherein an anaclitic object choice implies a mate who is associated with the person "who can *ensure life*" (akin to a parent figure), while a narcissistic object choice implies choosing a mate who is similar, "modelled on the self" [Armstrong, 1988, p. 77]. While I've emphasized already that Karenin is like a father to Anna, a function-love may also be conceived of as love that goes



Fig. 7.

Close-up of Anna's hand caressing Seryozha's skin, film still from *Anna Karenina*, 2012.

beyond personal satisfaction, consisting in having children and taking care of them [ibid, p. 98]. As Armstrong puts it, Anna's "maternal love for Seriozha is swallowed up by her narcissistic passion for Vronsky, which also stifles any potential love she might bear for Ani [the daughter that Vronsky and Anna have together]" [ibid, p. 106]. If Anna once had love for Seryozha, which she later "exchanged," she was completely indifferent to Ani from the very moment of her birth. Given Anna's rejection of function-love, it's no wonder she does not want to have more children with Vronsky, thinking that pregnancy will make her less attractive and she will not be able to keep his love. But is this really love? It is rather a desire which Anna seeks to keep on Vronsky's side towards herself by means of external beauty. Dolly's inner response to Anna's design is apt here: "If he [Vronsky] is looking for that, he will find gowns and manners even more attractive and charming, and... no matter how beautiful her entire full figure, her ardent face under that black hair, he will find even better ones" [Tolstoy, 2014, p. 583]. Anna's conduct vividly exemplifies a love/desire divide, suggesting that it occurs not only in men, as Freud said, but also in women. Anna's relationship with Vronsky holds on desire, whereas from what Dolly says, there seems to be something bigger on Vronsky's part that prompts him to stay with Anna, not to be confused with a mere passion which he can experience elsewhere. Mandelker observes that throughout the chapter where Anna attends the opera "Vronsky's role and reactions... parallel Karenin's in earlier scenes between Anna and her husband. Vronsky now assumes Karenin's role as Anna becomes a "closed book" (or cipher) to him" [Mandelker, 1991, p. 15]. As Vronsky goes over to the 'love' side of the divide, Anna loses her only sexual object and no longer has a person who can "mirror" her desire, that is, to respond in kind. Perhaps, this state of things is what leads her to a dead end.

All in all, psychoanalytic theory offers a way of understanding Anna's seemingly counterproductive choices and behaviors. It becomes much clearer why, being in love with Vronsky, she still hesitated whether to divorce Karenin or not. It was rather a sexual desire, not love, that she felt towards Vronsky, which is why the idea of her being merged with him in a married couple scared her. The person for whom she felt *love* was Karenin, a father-like figure. Thus, the love versus desire divide apparently worked in Anna's case, notwithstanding that Freud attributed it only to men. With regard to further research, it would be pertinent to examine Anna through Freud's later take on the death drive or the death instinct. Freud equates the death instinct to masochism, and, as he puts it, the libido diverts this instinct towards objects in the external world [Freud, 1961, p. 163]. The death instinct turns into what Freud calls "the destructive instinct, the instinct for mastery, or the will to power" [ibid, p. 163]. As I've pointed out earlier, Anna seeks to possess and objectify Vronsky, and there is clearly something destructive in that her undertaking. Anna's conduct allows for yet another reading, namely Freud's notion of moral masochism, which implies getting pleasure from suffering, regardless of what or who causes it [ibid, p.165]. Anna persistently provokes complications or reproaches from society, as if taking pleasure from it.

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