Rostova, Religiosity, and Raunchiness:
Tolstoy's Reflection of Female Characters in *War & Peace*

Throughout his most celebrated work, *War and Peace*, Leo Tolstoy illustrates the "virtuous woman" according to 19th century standards. Tolstoy gives careful and purposeful attention to character traits such as religiosity and piety as well as homemaking and childrearing in his "ideal woman." His concise disdain for those who pose as neither virtuous women aforementioned is reflected thoroughly within his female characters. This essay analyzes Tolstoy's and 19th century Russia's own expectations for women through the three most notable representations of each character trait: Márya and her religiosity, Natásha and her development into a mother and wife, and Hélène as an adulterer and morally corrupt femme-fatale. Each character's carefully crafted personality and value system translates a message to the reader concerning the perspective of Tolstoy, and by extension 19th-century Russian culture, on what makes a virtuous woman.

Throughout *War & Peace*, the concept of female sacrifice is one which Tolstoy describes as a noble and righteous form of femininity and applies to beloved characters such as Márya Bolkonskaya. The novel is descriptive of the jarring and, at points, dreadful relationship between Princess Márya and her father, Prince Nikolai (or Old Prince) Bolkónsky. Old Prince Bolkónsky, in his final and spiteful years, consistently berates Márya and inflicts absolute cruelty upon her with the knowledge that she will always remain loyal to him. Until the Prince's eventual death, Márya does, in fact, remain loyal to the Prince despite his purposeful mistreatment towards her, even regarding those moments as "the pride of sacrifice gathered in Princess Márya's soul" in which she would immediately halt herself from judgment towards her father's character, even

experiencing“ self-loathing” for said judgments.[1] This concept of self-sacrifice that permeates Princess Márya’s character is indicative of Tolstoy’s personal beliefs concerning the value of religiosity and quiet dignity shown through familial aspects. As stated in *A Woman’s Place . . .: The Young Tolstoy and the “Woman Question,* Princess Márya Bolkonskaya is regarded as the second “good” heroine aside from Natásha; the text highlights a “string of thoughtful religiosity and high ethical standards” that characterize her religiosity and its virtuous nature, which is consistent with Tolstoy’s personal beliefs.[2]

Tolstoy’s own opinions concerning religiosity and its role in shaping the quintessential Russian woman were reflected throughout the 19th century. This concept was referred to as the “sublime sufferers” in *Women in Russian Charity, 1762-1914.* Russian Orthodoxy played a significant role in what became a large part of the aristocratic Russian woman’s life in the 19th century. According to the article, throughout the 19th and 20th century aristocrats had learned that “routine almsgiving was not enough. To devout women Russian Orthodoxy offered a special model of female piety: the woman who devoted her life and fortune to helping others.”[3] Thus, devoting both wealth and physical strain to those less fortunate became a far more exemplary form of the aristocratic Russian woman paradigm. This character trait is further applied to Princess Márya, as she is known to house and care for impoverished “pilgrims” and therefore physically and emotionally care for them even against her father and brother’s wishes. Beyond this, her dream to go on a pilgrimage and leave her earthly possessions behind, with the goal to

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[1] Tolstoy, Leo, 1828-1910, Richard Pevear and Larissa, Volokhonsky, *War and Peace*. New York, Vintage Classics, 2008: 541.

[2] McLean, “A Woman’s Place”, 115.

[3] Lindenmeyr, Adele. “Public Life, Private Virtues: Women in Russian Charity, 1762-1914.” *Signs* 18, no. 3 (1993): 562–91. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174858: 563.

wholly worship God, is overshadowed by her dedication to her father and Andrei's son, Nikolai Andreiivich, permanently tying her to her station at Bald Hills.

Princess Márya's religiosity and selflessness are fully encapsulated within both the individual opinions of the author himself and the corroboration of what is described as the "historically accurate" portrayal and expectations of Russian aristocratic women during the 19th century. Princess Márya's value system is upheld by Tolstoy as something to be cherished; Márya eventually finds happiness in her station within the Russian aristocracy, as if being rewarded for her toleration and Christian forgiveness.

The character that is regarded as one of Tolstoy's most personally hated throughout the entirety of the novel is the cold and society-climbing Hélène Vassilievna. This character is a personal and very intimate portrayal of a female figure in Russian aristocracy that Tolstoy vehemently opposes. His portrayal of Hélène, or at least the narrator's, is what *The Sewanee Review* regards as giving the reader "a strong impression that she is not only a heartless, soulless creature but also speechless," for Hélène is "seldom allowed to speak for herself."[4] That article goes on to describe the few times Hélène does speak as "as if a dummy would all of a sudden begin to speak."[5] Tolstoy describes her throughout the novel in ways that perfectly justify this description of her character, posing her as an essentially despicable character whose only goal is to seduce as a means of gaining wealth and societal prevalence. Tolstoy goes as far as to allude to her and her brother Anatole engaging in incestuous acts, and he implies that her sudden death

[4] Gorin, Bernard. "Feminine Types in Tolstoy's Works." *The Sewanee Review* 16, no. 4 (1908): 442–51. http://www.jstor.org/stable/27530930: 444.

[5] Ibid.

was due to an abortion complication. This decisive point directly opposes Tolstoy's view that a virtuous woman strives towards motherhood.[6]

Tolstoy's characterization of Hélène demonstrates that his beliefs concerning women and sexuality were somewhat backward even compared to contemporary belief systems. During the 19th century women's rights had become a topic of political conversation. Tolstoy voiced disdain over this concept. He would openly oppose his writing colleagues for their interpretation of female heroines in their stories, most notably in the writers' circles he attended. One of these instances took place within his "Contemporary Circle," a group of distinguished writers in the 1850s. Within the group itself, many of the members were having flagrant affairs, with one member openly living with the wife of another. This concept clearly irked Tolstoy throughout this time, and he began to openly criticize fellow members of this Contemporary Circle and their femme-fatale-esque characters; once stating to George Sand (a writer whom Tolstoy had previously admired) that one of his female characters "should be tied to a chariot of shame and driven through the streets of Petersburg" for her actions in Sand's novel.[7] This hostility and clear opposition to characters with more free-form sexuality explains why characters such as Natásha or Márya are darling to Tolstoy and earn happy conclusions, whereas characters such as Hélène are apparent antagonists who meet an unhappy ending.

The novel continues to exemplify 19th-century Russian culture alongside Tolstoy's favored attributes for the novel's characters with the complex character of Natásha Rostóva and her journey to becoming the child-rearing "homemaker" archetype. Throughout the novel, Natásha is seen to have the strongest and most meaningful character development as she

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[6] McLean, Hugh. "A Woman's Place . . .: The Young Tolstoy and the 'Woman Question.'" *In Quest of Tolstoy*, 105–16. Academic Studies Press, 2008. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1zxsjx2.11: 116.

[7] McLean, "A Woman's Place", 108.

develops from a young girl into a mother and wife. Her transformation occurs through philosophical and physical means, as Tolstoy repeatedly notes the loss of her slender physique, replaced by a far calmer, plumper, and more motherly figure. By the end of the novel, she is described as being absorbed by "her family – that is, her husband, who had to be kept in such a way as to belong entirely to her, the household; and her children, whom she had to carry, give birth to, nurse, and bring up," directly attributing all of her focus and sense of purpose toward family maintenance.[8] It must be noted that she is constantly described in this way in a positive light; Tolstoy shows a deep love and appreciation for the development of her character with a reverence for her dedication to not only family but also the traditional, more folklore-driven means of doing so.

Natásha's maternal sensibilities that border the line of a more Russian-folk theme are a purposeful addition by Tolstoy, indicating his reverence for traditional Russian aesthetics. Tolstoy refers to Natásha's final form of character with terms that are frequently used by romantic writers, relating her physique and newfound principles in almost a quiet martyr-like form.[9] Her spirit is meant to harken back to a folklore-related historical aspect of the Russian woman, which Tolstoy so notably revered in his most beloved characters (another example of this being Platon). He adorns Natásha with this connection to the traditional Russian spirit, as one can see in her ability to dance a Russian dance to the music of the balalaika; Tolstoy quite literally described this moment as her, a girl who was raised by a Frenchwoman, "suck[ing] this spirit in from the Russian air she breathed".[10] Tolstoy's purposeful application of the "Russian

[8] Tolstoy, *War and Peace,* 1155.

[9] Olson, Laura J. "Russianness, Femininity, and Romantic Aesthetics in War and Peace." *The Russian Review* 56, no. 4 (1997): 515–31. https://doi.org/10.2307/131563: 522.

[10] Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 512.

spirit" into Natásha's character highlights his belief of Russian folklore being a necessary characteristic for the quintessential Russian woman.

While her sensibilities may lead one to believe that her misguided nature is synonymous in some instances with that of Hélène, especially in her moment of weakness when choosing between Andrei and Anatole, Tolstoy attempts to show as clearly as possible that these are two separate forms of this somewhat-similar issue. Whereas Hélène's constant adultery and lack of morality throughout the novel do center around her sexual prowess, it is not comparable to the plight of Natásha. This is meant to be clear in that Hélène views these men as a means of escalating status; this means of carousing and status-climbing is done in a sexualized, uncaring way. She almost spites Pierre and is described by Tolstoy in cruel and vile wording. Natásha, on the other hand, is regarded in a way that perceives her as feeling "too much," as opposed to Hélène's "too little." As Juliet Mitchell states in her chapter titled *Natásha and Hélène*, "If men can live in peace by surviving the irredeemable but life-related horrors of war, women can do so by surviving the unspeakable necessary dangers of sexuality and come through to maternity," which is precisely the case with Natásha and her character-development in the novel.[11] Where Hélène's character is portrayed negatively for her shallow and adulterous nature, Natásha's internal struggle with two men is more so her own personal war within herself and later becomes an entire moral dilemma that alters her character irrevocably. This minor difference in character representation is an essential note to make, especially when considering Tolstoy's own beliefs about how a woman should conduct herself. Tolstoy is concise and methodical in showing the differences between the two female characters, as well as explaining to the reader the differences between virtuous femininity and being an "erring woman."

[11] Mitchell, Juliet. "Natasha and Hélène". The Novel, Volume 2: Forms and Themes, Princeton University Press, 2006. Project MUSE muse.jhu.edu/book/100403: 534.

While in the modern age one can find Tolstoy's views on women unnerving and offensive, Tolstoy did not intend to mark women in a negative or mocking light. His prose represents that while he holds an outdated, and at some points jarring, viewpoint towards women who do not follow 19th century social expectations (by today's standards), he truly admires his heroic female characters and makes this clear to the readers. We see this with Natasha, who is described as aging into motherhood, which can be viewed as "letting herself go." Yet, Tolstoy describes her as a genuinely happy and fulfilled woman, as opposed to her once innocent and sometimes insolent younger self seen earlier in the text. At the end of the novel, both Márya and Natásha experience pure contentment and dedication within their familial spheres, something meant to be truly fruitful experiences for female characters Tolstoy clearly admired. Tolstoy places Natásha as the soul and foundation of the household; her husband is so in love with her and so loyal to her that he is stated as "not daring, not only to flirt, but even to talk smilingly with another woman," even bringing her on business trips out of respect and a mutual understanding of her importance.[12] While one may disagree on whether Tolstoy's views on women are acceptable or correct, it is essential to note that he viewed the instilling of these feminine virtues in his characters with a sense of reverence and respect toward those who took on the role of motherhood or religiousness and sensibility.

Every writer is guilty of implicating their own personal value and belief systems into their work, and Tolstoy is no exception. Furthermore, Tolstoy does not attempt to claim otherwise. Tolstoy upholds these values within his novel through his main female characters, who additionally uphold the socially preferred behavior of aristocratic women. It is essential to acknowledge that the position and preferred behavior of women during the 19th century in

[12] Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 1156.

Russia aligns with some of the most impactful female characters in the novel. Each character is representative of a different notion that consumed the Russian aristocratic woman as an aesthetic and therefore represented an entire 19th-century culture. Tolstoy makes no move to deny this and instead offers a detailed analysis of each aspect of said aristocratic women. Important pillars of these women, whether regarded with good connotations or bad, instill a sense of character development that is essential to readers and allows them to properly understand the complexities of the novel. Hélène's sexual proclivity as a means of creating a villain, the quiet religious dignity of Márya, and the warm, calm air of Natásha as a mother and wife are all quintessential aspects of what an aristocratic 19th-century Russian woman could have been, and it is clear that both Tolstoy's work and societal expectations of the era are indicated by these multifaceted fictional women who are so famously regarded within literature.

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