Dolly Oblonskaia as a Structural Device in Anna Karenina

Dolly Oblonskaia has not fared well in the many literary studies of Tolstoi's masterpiece Anna Karenina. She has been either totally neglected or, at best relegated to the minor role of a "foolish," "early aged" woman, harassed by constant material and marital anxieties, and essentially an unpretentious and uninteresting character in the novel. Yet, it seems to me that Dolly meant a great deal more to Tolstoi. In many ways she represents his ideal of womanhood, and in this capacity Tolstoi uses her as the basis for his novel's monumental structure. It is through Dolly's sensibilities most often that Tolstoi conveys the effect of the power of evil and of the demands of the moral law of goodness which are, after all, the fundamental themes of the novel. These themes anticipate Tolstoi's later philosophical writings about basic moral and social issues.

Dolly, Stiva Oblonskii's careworn wife, is, in contrast to her sister-in-law and friend Anna Karenina, the image of the ideal, self-sacrificing woman whose healthy instinct unfailingly leads her on to the right path of life. She remains consistently the most faithful follower of Tolstoi's moral rules of any of his fictional characters who symbolize the keeper of the family principle. Basically, Tolstoi subdivides his fictional women into three categories: the maiden-teenager, the lover, and the mother. To the maiden-teenager he gives his warmest, unreserved sympathy (most memorably to Natasha Rostova and Kitty Shcherbatskaia). Innocence and purity is at the essence of girlhood for Tolstoi. The maiden belongs to the world of nature and instinct, and therefore enables Tolstoi to view her with an innocent and affectionate eye. The woman lover who courageously seeks independence and fulfillment presents a crucial problem to Tolstoi. If she sacrifices the sanctity of family life to personal happiness, she is doomed to tragedy like Anna, because in Tolstoi's view a woman's exclusive task is to care for her family, specifically her children: she has full charge and responsibility for their righteous upbringing. Throughout Tolstoi's fiction, his letters and his publicistic essays we find an unconditional worship of motherhood which comes to a culmination precisely in Dolly. Quite early in his career Tolstoi designates to woman a somewhat limited function in life: she must devote her energies to the birth and raising of children in a family environment. But to achieve a maximum state of virtue in this vocation woman must develop her personality and especially her capacity for selfless love and self-sacrifice. The goal of woman's character development is to become a good mother. This is clearly stated in Tolstoi's letter to Valeriia Arsen'eva, the first young woman whom he seriously courted in 1856: "Besides the fact that the vocation of a woman is to be a wife, her major vocation is to be a
mother, and to be a mother [mater'iu] and not a child-bearer [matkoi] (do you understand the difference?) development is necessary. Thus the key-stone of virtue for woman lies in motherhood and in keeping the family together. Dolly fulfills both roles perfectly at all moments and from this point of view her function in the novel deserves re-evaluation.

Tolstoi is reported to have said to his wife, Sof'ia Andreevna, many years after the completion of Anna Karenina that most of all he liked "the family idea [mys' semeinuiu]" in that book. Dolly not only impersonates this idea, but she also comes from a traditional, happy family background, a prerequisite if a woman is to become a virtuous mother and wife in Tolstoi's universe. Furthermore, Dolly's position in the structure of the novel points to her essential importance as a basic element of cohesion. Dolly appears (in an active part or only mentioned) in roughly one third of the entire novel (in about 70 chapters out of a total of 239). She is mentioned as the first major character in the third sentence of the novel which simultaneously introduces the theme of adultery—Oblonskii's faithlessness—the tragic leitmotif of the book. Then she continues to appear and be instrumental at all major collisions throughout the course of the work including the last part, thus tying the threads of events together. Her role is central to the formal structure: the essence of the relationship between the most important characters is unveiled and held together through Dolly's vision, concern and acts. She functions as a structural device in Tolstoi's method of "linking" (stseplenie) the elements of the narrative. The structural centrality of Dolly's position also is emphasized by her conventional middle-of-the-road marital relationship with Oblonskii. The Dolly-Stiva pair represents the common family arrangement of their social group's vast majority, set between the two extremes: Kitty-Levin—the ideal patriarchal, organically loving pair—on the one hand, and the adulterous, passionate, illicit Anna-Vronskii affair on the other. In this position Dolly establishes herself as the mediator between the major themes and motifs, as the connecting axis of the two circles—the Anna-Vronskii and Kitty-Levin circles—directing both in their predetermined rotation.

In the opening chapters we meet Dolly dealing poorly with her predicament, ready to abandon her unfaithful husband. This decision is in agreement with her momentary mood, but not with her true disposition. At the end of her conversation with Anna, who has arrived to soften Dolly's outburst, Dolly insists herself on complete forgiveness. Ironically and significantly, the lack of