

ANNA KARENINA AND DON GIOVANNI:
THE VENGEANCE MOTIF IN OBLONSKY'S DREAM

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"Yes, now how was it?" says Stiva Oblonsky in *Anna Karenina's* opening chapter, as he tries to remember a dream. "Yes, Alabin was giving a dinner on glass tables—ah yes, and the tables were singing 'Il mio tesoro.'" Thus the theme of vengeance, first stated by the novel's biblical epigraph, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay," is reintroduced by Tolstoy via the unconscious of his comic hero, for near the end of "Il mio tesoro," a famous aria from Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, Don Ottavio emphatically promises to avenge. Here the idea of vengeance suddenly and strangely appears in the mind of one of the novel's principal characters, the heroine's brother, as if to foreshadow the bitterness that is soon to be experienced by that same heroine, but evaded by Stiva. In addition to the theme of vengeance, the aria also suggests another important thematic parallel between Mozart's opera and Tolstoy's novel: namely, that of sensuality, which courses through both works in abundance.

Here I wish to examine chiefly those parallels which assist in further illuminating aspects of Oblonsky's dream, in relation to both *Don Giovanni* and *Anna Karenina*. The materials presented here shed new light on the discussion of ambivalence in the opening of Tolstoy's novel. (Jackson 1990). The precise meaning of the New Testament epigraph (Romans 12:19) which opens the novel has bewildered critics who have tried to get a firm grasp on what it signifies, in terms of Anna's fall from grace and her suicide near the book's conclusion. Boris Eikhenbaum, in *Tolstoi in the Seventies*, dedicates an entire chapter (137-148) to a discussion of *Anna Karenina's* epigraph, and to the various hypotheses that have been set forth by interpreters in the past. In the course of the discussion, Eikhenbaum draws attention to the critical attempts of Veresaev, Dostoevsky, and even Tolstoy, among others, to come to terms with the epigraph's meaning. In search of an explanation, Eikhenbaum himself eventually turns to Schopenhauer, whom Tolstoy had probably been reading very carefully. Schopenhauer's ethical position (that is, his concept of an "eternal justice" existing outside the phenomenal world), and especially the German phrasing of the biblical quotation ("mein ist die Rache"), provides Eikhenbaum with the tools for developing his own interpretation.

In the following pages, I turn not to Schopenhauer, but to Mozart. The gateway to an understanding of the epigraph can be discovered in Oblonsky's dream (Chapter One), which includes a somewhat obscure reference to *Don Giovanni*, that tragicomic masterpiece filled with despair and eroticism. In addition to demonstrating that certain aspects of Oblonsky's dream can be illuminated through an examination of the themes of sensuality and vengeance in Mozart's opera and Tolstoy's novel, I hope to also demonstrate that it encapsulates the general idea of the epigraph as Tolstoy himself intended it. However, in order to gain a better

understanding of the matter, let us first take a short look at the importance that Mozart, *Don Giovanni*, and music had in Tolstoy's life and works.

Mozart was a composer whom Tolstoy especially revered, and *Don Giovanni* a work about which he had many admiring things to say. On the fifteenth of December, 1856, after witnessing a performance of the opera, he called it a "poetic piece, very." The piano transcription for four hands was a regular part of the repertory in the Tolstoy family's domestic performances, so it is not particularly surprising that one should find a reference to it in one of his works. He was to allude to another of its famous arias, "La ci darem la mano," later in his career, in his play *The Light Shines in Darkness*.

Musical references in Tolstoy's fiction are, of course, abundant. While a complete list of all of them would be somewhat out of place here (indeed, it would be impossible to make such a list in a succinct fashion), it should yet be noted that Tolstoy employs music in his fiction for a variety of reasons. Sometimes he tries to evoke a certain mood, as he does with the droning monotony of Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata" in *Family Happiness*, and with the tempestuousness of the "Kreutzer Sonata" in his novella of the same name. Or he may delineate some aspect of character, as he does with the symphonic choral music of Petia Rostov's dream in *War and Peace*, which serves as an embodiment of his youthful ardor and feelings of heroism. Or he might make some comment on contemporary modes of life, as he does with Lizst's "Rhapsody" in *Resurrection*.

The aria in Oblonsky's dream, however, works differently. It acts as a reference to themes shared by Tolstoy's novel and Mozart's opera: those of sensuality and vengeance. Although we are primarily concerned with the vengeance motif here, a short look at sensuality will enrich our understanding of the matter.

Sensuality drives the action of Mozart's opera. Don Giovanni attempts to seduce all the female characters, who, for the most part, tend to resist his efforts. Although Don Giovanni's attempts in the opera result in failure, he is renowned for amazing successes in the past, and looms on the stage as the ever-successful seducer and sensualist. It should be pointed out that in Mozart's opera, the wanton sensuality of the Don eventually leads to his fiery demise, and this demise is initiated by his deliberate taunting of supernatural, immortal forces. In the famous graveyard scene (Act Two, Scene 4), Don Giovanni mockingly asks the statue of the dead commendatore to dinner. When the statue does indeed come, the Don is asked to repent of his sins. But Don Giovanni is steadfast in his sensuous sinfulness, and so is led down to hell by the statue and a host of demons.

In *Anna Karenina*, the importance of sensuality cannot be emphasized enough. Were it not for the allure of the flesh, Anna might have never confronted the price of passion. Were it not for the allure of the flesh, her brother Stiva might have never fallen for the French governess. This purely sensual allure also helped Vronsky turn Kitty's head. Furthermore, the utter absence of such an allure contributed, perhaps, to Levin's dissatisfaction with himself, and his failure to appeal, at first, to Kitty.

The connections of this theme with *Don Giovanni* are made evident in an earlier draft of Tolstoy's novel, in which Anna actually attends a performance of the opera. It disturbs her so much that she walks out,

implying that something in the opera greatly upset her, perhaps the drastically different treatment received by the themes of sensuality and seduction in the opera, so much at odds with her own experiences. When Oblonsky's musical dream occurs, she is not yet guilty of adultery, but Oblonsky himself is already guilty of an affair with the French governess of his own children.

In addition to its contextual associations with sensuality and seduction, "Il mio tesoro" is also linked with the theme of vengeance. "Tell her that I am going to avenge her wrongs," Don Ottavio declares near the conclusion of the aria. In the context of *Anna Karenina*, this of course contains an inescapable referent to the novel's epigraph, which so closely precedes it. Yet, although this echo is apparent, it does not explain why the aria should figure in the dream of Oblonsky, on whom no one is planning on wreaking vengeance. Let us attempt to understand why, aside from its more obvious associations with sensuality, "Il mio tesoro" should be included in Oblonsky's dream.

When the dream is initially recalled to mind, Oblonsky notes only the aria's title, without mentioning the threat of vengeance sung near the end. He then says that the dream aria (sung by the glass tables) was actually not "Il mio tesoro," but rather "something better." Oblonsky, having just awakened, is apparently in a state of confusion, but it seems that the words "mio tesoro" might have a special, elusive significance for him, especially when associated with glass tables and dinner parties. The title flashes in Oblonsky's head, and yet doubt about its identity remains.

Below are listed the occurrences of the phrase "mio tesoro" in Lorenzo da Ponte's libretto for *Don Giovanni*.

	Character	Act, Scene	Page ¹
1.	Don Ottavio	I, 1	(91)
2.	Donna Elvira	II, 1	(157)
3.	Don Giovanni	II, 1	(158)
4.	Donna Anna	II, 2	(165)
5.	Don Ottavio	II, 2	(172)
6.	Don Ottavio	Epilogue	(202)

Of these six instances, there is one which provides yet another link between the two works in terms of sensuality. In Act Two, during a scene in which Don Giovanni attempts to seduce Donna Elvira, the Don gently coos outside her window, "Come to the window, my treasure [mio tesoro]." Here, the window is associated with "mio tesoro" and seduction. It is a barrier between the Don and his sensual goal, the effort to attain which comes to absolutely nothing.

Perhaps this scene, in which seduction is linked (albeit somewhat weakly) with a window, might remind some readers of an incident in Tolstoy's novel. In Book one, Chapter twenty-nine of the novel, Anna, on her way back to Petersburg from Moscow, presses a paper knife against the cold windowpane, and then against her cheek. The window can also be seen, perhaps, as a kind of barrier between the heroine and sensuality, since this action takes place not long after she had met with Vronsky. This

action might be a symbolic rendition of what had transpired between her and Vronsky in the days just before her journey.

The fact that it is tables that are singing at a dinner party can also be explained in terms of *Don Giovanni*, for the climactic scene in Mozart's opera occurs while the Don is having dinner with his servant, Leporello. Several knocks are heard, and then the statue of the commendatore enters, bellowing, "Don Giovanni! You invited me to dine with you! And I have arrived!" This is the final arrival of vengeance. The statue has come to make good the promise inscribed in the graveyard: "Here I await vengeance on the wicked man who brought me to my death." The statue is a manifestation of "heaven" ("cielo"), which during the opera is consistently invoked as a kind of harbinger of vengeance and justice. "We must bow our heads to Heaven's will," says Don Ottavio in Act Two, his words being an anticipation of the vengeance at the end of the aria.

When seen as a parallel to the dinner scene in the opera, Oblonsky's dream-party is itself an anticipation of vengeance, for the situation would imply the eventual arrival of vengeful heaven, the statue of the commendatore. The phrase "mio tesoro" works in the same way, for it implies the declaration of vengeance which inevitably comes in the aria denoted by those words.

Of course, this brings one back to the vengeance motif in the epigraph. It must again be asked: how is one to understand the notion of vengeance in terms of Anna's fate?

Tolstoy once said of the epigraph, "I chose this epigraph... simply to convey the idea that the evil that man does has as its consequences only bitterness, which comes not from man, but from God, and which Anna Karenina, too, experienced" (Eikhenbaum 1960). Thus Oblonsky's dream encapsulates the general theme of the epigraph as intended by Tolstoy himself, and also provides an abstract condensation of Anna's situation. Embedded in the dream is the anticipation of vengeance, brought about by excessive sensuality; the vengeance carries with it an atmosphere of the inevitable, and the feeling that the effects lie outside one's will. The reason for this is simple: vengeance is unavoidably invoked at the end of both *Don Giovanni*'s dinner scene and the "Il mio tesoro" aria. Because of the dream's reference to *Don Giovanni*, and the dinner party contained within the dream, this anticipation of vengeance can furthermore be linked with the concept of a vengeful heaven. This idea of a vengeful heaven, finally, is what Tolstoy claimed to be the source of the vengeance which befell Anna.

The moralizing epilogue that follows the opera's climax contains a final "mio tesoro." Don Ottavio says to Donna Anna, "Now, my treasure [mio tesoro], that we have all been avenged by heaven, offer to me some relief, do not make me suffer any longer." Here again, "mio tesoro" forms a final link with vengeance, although this time somewhat more directly than in the aria.

Thus, a connection is established between the opera and the novel which rests solely on the words "mio tesoro." Oblonsky, guilty of base sensuality, dreams of "Il mio tesoro" because of its many associations with seduction; yet the words "mio tesoro" can also be associated with vengeance, especially in the aria specifically and traditionally identified by this phrase.

It appears that sensuality leads inevitably to heaven's vengeance, and that the mere occurrence of this phrase immediately implies an inescapable progression beyond the power of one's will. Oblonsky's dream is a semiconscious recurrence of the novel's biblical epigraph, which Tolstoy intended to convey evil's bitter consequences, and which also acts as a foreshadowing of those consequences that are eventually to overtake Anna.

It becomes apparent that the foregoing illuminations show even more strongly that what is needed is an attempt to interpret the entire dream. However, such an endeavor lies outside the scope of my purpose, which has been to examine only those aspects of Oblonsky's dream that are made clearer when seen in relation to *Don Giovanni*, and to demonstrate the corollaries between the theme of vengeance in the dream, the opera, and the epigraph.

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NOTES

¹ The page references to "Il mio tesoro" are from the Ellen Bleiler translation. Here is the aria in question:

"Il mio tesoro intanto
Andate a consolar,
E del bel ciglio il pianto
Cercate di asciugar.
Ditele che i suoi torti
A vendicar io vado;
Che sol di stragi e morti
Nunzio vogl'io tornar."

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