
Research Note

Tolstoy As Goldilocks: The Solution To a Mystery

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In her perceptive structural analysis of *Anna Karenina* Barbara Lönnqvist has explored some of the key leitmotifs or “linkages” (Tolstoy’s term), which mark the fictional texture of that novel. Among these is one which—unlike the unkempt *muzhik* of the heroine’s dreams, or her small traveling bag, or the metal machinery which follows Anna and Vronsky from start to finish—is so unobtrusive as to have escaped previous notice. This is the *ursine imagery* which periodically crops up in connection with Levin’s courtship of Kitty. Starting with the Scherbatskii governess’s playful allusion—in English—to Kitty as “tiny bear” (from the well-known nursery tale), the motif recurs in diverse contexts ranging from folklore to astronomy (the Ursa Major constellation) to ventry (Levin as a hunter of bears) to, at the end, beekeeping—hence honey gathering (Levin as, in the etymological sense, a *medved*’).

In Lönnqvist’s erudite bear hunt (only the high points have been touched on here) one point remains obscure, namely, its inception. Specifically: why should Kitty—and by extension her two sisters—have been identified with the nuclear family of the fairy tale? What, aside from their number, connects the Scherbatskii maidens with the Momma, the Poppa and the Baby Bear of the fable?

If Lönnqvist is silent on this point it is because the novel itself offers no clues. But where intrinsic evidence is wanting, extrinsic, i. e., biographical, data come to the rescue. As is known, starting in 1861 young Count Tolstoy, still a bachelor, became an

assiduous visitor in the home of his future wife, then a nubile teenager, and, not coincidentally, her two unmarried sisters. That certain aspects of Tolstoy’s attentions are plainly reflected in Levin’s wooing of Kitty Scherbatskii in the novel has long been recognized. One correspondence between fact and fiction has, however, eluded investigators. And precisely herein lies, I would propose, the solution to the mystery.

That Tolstoy was once, like Goldilocks, an “intruder” (though clearly a welcome one) in a “family” of three and that, further, like Goldilocks he had disrupted—though again in a positive sense—the domestic tranquility of that trio—such correspondences are scarcely sufficient to explain the governess’s seemingly arbitrary allusion. A more specific link connecting fact with the fairy tale is plainly needed. And onomastics, I would suggest, provides such a link. For what Count Tolstoy was intruding on during those early years was, quite literally a *family of three bears* (Behrs), that being of course the surname of Sonya and her sisters. Nor, clearly, was the comic aspect of the coincidence lost on the participants, witness the “joke” [*shutka*] first made by Levin and, years later, recalled by Kitty’s governess (*PSS* 18: 34).

When the Behrs of real life were metamorphosed into the Scherbatskiis of fiction the pun of course was lost. Nevertheless, transplanted onto novelistic soil “tiny bear” became for the creative artist an *ushlushlivyi medved*’ indeed, launching as it did that extended series of ursine linkages traced by Lönnqvist. “Les petites causes,” as Tolstoy himself had once observed, “produisent de grands effets” (*PSS* 46: 3).

Notes

1. Barbara Lönnqvist, “Anna Karenina,” in Donna Tussing Orwin, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Tolstoy* (Cambridge, 2002), 80-95.

2. Not only was the pun lost, but the novel also altered, if only slightly, the relative ages of the sisters. In real life Sonia was the “middle bear,” younger than Liza but older than Tania.