

Panelist: Jennifer Flaherty, University of California, Berkeley

Topic: Split Selves and Significant Others: The Role of the Peasant in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*

This paper investigates the structural role of the peasant in *Anna Karenina*. I focus on scenes of confrontation between peasants and main characters (Anna and Levin) and suggest that a dialectic is staged between self/other and subject/object. As a generalized and even idealized image, "the peasant" plays an important role in the narrative fabric of Tolstoy's novel: he provides background to the internal dramas of the main characters and represents the world outside them. This external world is natural: the image of the laboring peasant appears embedded in the landscape, rendered seemingly equivalent to the sloping hills and ravines that envelop him. But this external world is also social, fraught with power dynamics that implicate every individual. The characters' relationship to the peasant makes manifest their relationship to the environment – which is at once natural(ized) and social. This relationship thus articulates a central question of the novel: how can "the individual" find his or her place in the world?

Focusing on the peasant's role in this struggle – and ultimately, in the creation of novelistic subjectivity, I argue that questions of narrative form merge with social problems. More than reflecting Russia's socio-political reality in its content, the novel makes visible in its form the nature of the relationship between the educated public and the peasantry. In drawing out the connection between narrative, socio-political, and ethical categories, I follow the Bakhtinian notion that narrative aesthetics have the unique ability to manifest and materialize social dynamics. Through narrative, we might reconstruct the image of the peasant that was so central to the 1870s' socio-political landscape. Situating the novel within this landscape, in turn, we see the importance of "the social" to its structuration.