

Title: Varenka and the Economy of Women's Work in "Anna Karenina"

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Abstract:

Among the dozens of meticulously crafted minor characters in *Anna Karenina*, Varenka stands out on account of her indefiniteness. Perhaps because we encounter her primarily as the object of other people's fantasies and plans, we are denied certain crucial pieces of information about her, such as her family name. But her indefiniteness depends as much on what we do know about her as what we do not: neither young nor old, neither noble nor common, neither a relation of Madame Stahl's nor a hired helper, Varenka seems impossible to pin down. Yet, one thing is clear: she is perpetually at work. This paper is an attempt to think through the meaning of Varenka for some of the novel's broad thematic concerns. In particular, Varenka is one of the faces of female labor—intellectual, manual, and emotional—in the novel, among such working women as Dolly, Agafya Mikhailovna, and Anna Karenina herself. From this perspective, I argue, Varenka can illuminate the novel's division of labor among a large network of characters, most of whom are remarkably hardworking, whether their work is remunerated or not.