

Title: Two Tragedies and One Happy Ending: Tolstoy's Self-Sacrificing Women and the Paradox of Renunciation

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Tolstoy's art reflects a lifelong quest to determine the best course of moral action for his fictional heroes. Ultimately he would settle on the viewpoint outlined in his philosophical treatise *On Life* that self-sacrifice and renunciation of the individual personality are the only means of expressing true love for others. In spite of insistence on the sacrificial model of morality, however, none of his characters' experiences with sacrifice is successful (Veresaev 109). An analysis of three of Tolstoy's most sacrificial characters, Sonya, Mary Bolkonsky (from *War and Peace*), and Varenka (from *Anna Karenina*), reveals the problematic nature of self-sacrifice.

Critics have read these three characters as essentially different from each other: Varenka as an early feminist who rejects the restraints of marriage (Mandelker), Sonya as both purely sacrificial (Shestov) and self-centered (Grenier), and Mary as either morally ideal or self-deceptive (Wasiolek). This paper, by identifying shared factors in the motivations for sacrifice in each, will demonstrate that each uses sacrifice as the only means of self-assertion available (due to oppressive circumstances), and will argue that the only significant difference between them concerns their choices to adhere to or reject self-sacrifice: Varenka and Sonya choose the former and, dejected, write themselves out of their texts, while Mary does the latter and finds greater happiness than she imagined possible. Additionally, close analysis of their experiences will illuminate the flawed nature of sacrifice that Tolstoy's characters would never quite overcome: it violates its own intent by preventing empathy and causing self-isolation.

References

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