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## Anna Karenina By Leo Tolstoy: The Polarization Between The Distinct Gender Roles In Society

Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* realistically portrays a socially and psychologically incarcerated female protagonist in her marriage in 19th century Russia. Although she ends her marriage, she forces herself into a seemingly loving relationship with Vronsky, her lover. However, the relationship of Anna Karenina and Vronsky showcases the polarization between the distinct gender roles in society. Although considered humdrum, the steeplechase scene symbolizes the rigid gender roles and male authority found within structures of Imperial Russia in the 19th century.

The setting of the scene further associates sports as being male-dominated and allows Tolstoy to establish the type of authority men have in Russian society. Horse-racing in nineteenth-century Imperial Russia was dominated by men as it was illegal for women to participate. During the steeplechase scene, Tolstoy showcases this distinction by contrasting the stagnant female characters to the male characters that are racing. The setting of a race-track also emphasizes dominance and cruelty to animals as we see Vronsky's treatment of his horse, Frou Frou. The normalized violence and mistreatment of animals are also apparent in scenes where the men are hunting. For example, with Velosky and his hunt with Levin, we see his abuse and overworking of his dogs and horses. Tolstoy almost suggests that with every male-dominated sport shown there seems to be a sort of sadistic impulse underlying the motivation of the men in *Anna Karenina*.

Vronsky's reluctance to take into consideration his actions towards Frou Frou showcases male irresponsibility and authoritarian control. When we first start the scene, Vronsky is told by Cord, Frou Frou's trainer, "Don't be in a hurry and remember one thing: don't hold her in at the fences, and don't urge her on; let her go as she likes." (Tolstoy 182). Vronsky, of course, doesn't obey the rules given by the trainer and throughout the race, he insists on applying pressure to Frou Frou's veins and trying to control her movements. We see Vronsky "holding in the mare with all his force as she tugged at the bridle." (Tolstoy 183) Another indication of Vronsky's assertive force can be seen in how Vronsky "saw the uncertainty in the mare's ears and lifted the whip, but at the same time felt that his fears were groundless." (Tolstoy 185). In this case, Vronsky is seen as the one in authority while Frou Frou can be seen as a victim in this situation. Her underlying movements can all be seen to support Vronsky and the race. But in the end, she is deemed useless to Vronsky drives her to her death. Her submission rather than fighting back at Vronsky when he is tugging at her veins shows reinforces the structure of authority. In fact, Frou Frou indicates that she knows what Vronsky wants her to do in order to win this race: "Just at the same moment, Vronsky thought Makhotin now had to be passed, Frou-Frou herself...put on a substantial burst of speed and began closing in on Makhotin." (Tolstoy 184). Frou Frou is stuck in the grasp of Vronsky as her life depends on it. Winning the race becomes a mission for her as it determines whether she lives or dies.

When Frou Frou falls, Vronsky is unaware of her injury and he assumes that if he exercises more force, she will get back up again and win the race for him. "Still unable to realize what happened, Vronsky tugged at his mare's reins. Again, she struggled all over like a fish. Vronsky kicked her with his heel in the stomach and again fell to tugging at the rein." (Tolstoy

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186). His tendency to go straight to violence when dealing with issues, signify the abuse and violence that men have on women in society. Not only does he not care for Frou Frou's injury, but his mind is also all focused on the race. His first reaction when he sees the injured mare is "The race is lost!" (Tolstoy 186) There is no sorrow or pity for the horse but rather Vronsky almost views the horse as some sort of object that can be used at his expense. This mentality reinforces such structures and provides further victimization and subordination of women and animals.

While Frou Frou has broken her back, Vronsky is completely fine. This can be seen as an allegory to the views of gender and double standard in Russian Society. While women are given the blame, the men are unscathed. We see this clearly in one of the main issues of the book, adultery. At the beginning of the novel, we are given the situation with Stephan Arkadyevitch Oblonsky committing adultery with the family's governess. When Dolly and Anna chastise him for adultery, his reaction is not so much regret for his wrongdoing but rather regret at being caught. Despite his wrongdoing, Tolstoy does not depict him as a villainous character but rather a joyful and kind man. On the contrary, he represents an ordinary man in 19th century Europe. On the other hand, when Anna commits adultery, she is considered a fallen woman by society and completely shunned. She is depicted by Tolstoy as miserable and a woman that has run away from all her proper responsibilities as a woman and a mother. This drives her to the point of madness and even to her death, just like Frou Frou.

Due to Frou Frou's mane being injured, she is no longer deemed useful to Vronsky anymore. This was then decided as Vronsky "could not answer any questions. He turned.. walked away from the race-course." (Tolstoy 186) Vronsky had the chance to try to prevent the killing of Frou Frou but instead, he just walked off and decided not to intervene. This is a total contrast to how he intervened at the train station when the peasant was killed but he couldn't do it for a mere animal that had lost him the race. The killing of Frou Frou was unnecessary but Vronsky's action is a depiction of this sort of violence and cruelty that men had over women. Frou Frou is clearly aligned with the female consciousness and his chapter draws several connections to her and Anna Karenina. Not only is this chapter an allegory of Vronsky's treatment of Anna and him driving her to her death, it is also an allegory of male authority. Death is not only seen as a symbol, but the very sport of a steeplechase race upholds the values of a patriarchal society. As men are only allowed to race, horses are put through cruelty and abuse, the normalization of killing an animal when it's not of use. All these reinforce the structure of patriarchy in 19th century Imperial Russia.

The steeplechase scene is a prime example of a hierarchical society that depends on the physical and sexual abuse of women and animals. Nineteenth-Century Russian society men were dominant in the workplace, community, and government. This was not only a product of social values but also one that was solidified in law. Although Tolstoy showcases this depressing issue, he also showcases scenes of female empowerment, feminism, and modernization for this old social system through female characters like Kitty Shcherbatsky and Varenka Andreevna. His inclusion of these scenes shows that it is possible for improvements in their corrupt society.