The Role of Nicholas Levin in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*

Though the appearances of Constantine Levin's brother Nicholas in *Anna Karenina* are limited to a handful of scenes depicting his rapidly declining health and eventual prolonged death, their dramatic intensity and the lasting impressions that they leave on Kostya render them memorable and key to the progression of the novel nonetheless. Tolstoy employs Nicholas's fiercely liberal, communist-leaning political stances and his frequently radical intellectual and social viewpoints as a rather convenient vehicle for commentary on Russian society. Yet even more salient to the novel as a whole is Nicholas' role in prompting his brother's recurring existential contemplations of G-d and death and the way in which his demise ultimately functions to facilitate a deeper, more intimate union between Kitty and Levin. Kitty's proclivity for dealing rationally and comfortably with imminent death while her husband stands by, horrified and practically helpless in his cerebral contemplations of the situation, arouses poignant feelings of love and respect within Levin. Furthermore, on a more technical level, the revelation of Kitty's pregnancy coincides directly with the moment of Nicholas' death, thus completing a life-cycle of sorts within the novel. Nicholas' role in *Anna Karenina* gains its significance most prominently from the impact of his life on Kostya, as he possesses a unique ability to "disturb [Levin's] innermost thoughts," (316) serving as a muse for his philosophical ruminations, compelling him to acknowledge the inextricable ties between life and death, and aiding his quest for the discovery of meaning in human existence.

Tolstoy introduces Nicholas quite early on and wastes no time in depicting him as a difficult, standoffish, somewhat repellent character, and moreover "a ruined man who had squandered the greatest part of his fortune, mixed with the strangest and worst society, and quarreled with his brothers" (24). No sooner does Nicholas gain his first mention in the novel

than he becomes a source of mental anxiety for his brother Constantine, who because of Nicholas begins to feel that "[He] cannot be at peace" since "a struggle was going on within him between the desire to forget his unfortunate brother for the present, and the consciousness that this would be wrong" (24). Though at this point Levin temporarily casts aside the thought of Nicholas as he prepares to visit with Kitty, his brother soon resurfaces in his mind when Levin asks himself "is he not right that everything on earth is evil and horrid?" (77). Thus the gloom permeating Levin's mind as he thinks of his pessimistic brother prompts him to look harshly upon the world with dark-colored glasses and temporarily integrate a dose of Nicholas' negativity into his own perspective. These periods of negativity are a key phase of the maturation process that Levin undergoes during the novel, and only by traversing through can he emerge triumphant in the glories of life by the book's end. Levin notably expresses a degree of sympathy for Nicholas and even compares himself directly to his unfortunate and oft-ridiculed sibling, noting that, "I know his soul, and know that we resemble on another" (77). The function of this comparison is twofold, as it initially forges a meaningful connection between the two brothers and thereby highlights for the reader the fact that Nicholas will play a vital role in Levin's story, and then it further inclines one to pity Nicholas and look upon him more kindly because he is juxtaposed directly with one of the novel's more reputable and upstanding characters. Levin's dedication to defending his brother as "no worse than those who despised him" (78) grants Nicholas credibility, paving the way for him to considerably influence the course of events in the book.

Tolstoy contributes to the pathos of Nicholas' character through his use of physiognomy, describing his eyes with their "peculiar, naïve gaze" which "light up with joy" upon recognizing his brother, and his generally "awkward, blundering manner" (80). He also relates that Nicholas has taken in a former whore, Mary Nikolaevna, to live with him as his wife, and while this action

does not increase the respectability of his image, it does show that he is a man not altogether lacking in compassion, for he demands that those who wish to know him must "love and respect her" (80). During his first meeting with Nicholas, Constantine tellingly admits to himself that his brother is unfortunate and "needed friendship" (83) and subsequently vows that he will "never allow himself to forget him again, but would watch over him, keep him in sight, and be ready to help when things went hard with him" (85). This revelation on Levin's part forecasts the extent to which Nicholas' tragic story will come to affect Levin. Many of the details accompanying Nicholas' various appearances in the novel paint him in a disagreeable light, yet because of Kostya's consistent efforts to identify with his brother and vindicate his characteristically abrasive behavior, one cannot easily dismiss Nicholas as simply an embittered misanthrope, but rather must instead give him due attention as a relevant and purposeful character, and one whose life resonates with many of the novel's most crucial themes.

Nicholas remains characteristically present in Levin's mind even after the latter's return to Moscow, when "remembering his brother Nicholas," he begins to reflect on communism and the state of the economy, resolving in light of the vast economic disparities he perceives between peasants and landowners to, "work still more and allow himself still less luxury" (85). In this moment the seed that will become his book about the nature of the laborer in agriculture begins to germinate, and his determination to work in the fields among his peasants rather than live idly off of their labor gains substantial momentum. These resolutions are integral to Levin's character and remain central to him throughout the novel, continually influencing his behavior. Here they have their impetus in his considerations of former conversations with Nicholas, thus revealing that the influence of Levin's brother lies at the core of his developing social and moral ideology. Later encounters with Nicholas will also precipitate evolutions in Levin's thinking process. A

few months after this first episode, when Nicholas arrives to visit Levin at his estate, Levin initially worries that Nicholas, who "knew him through and through…would force him to make a clean breast of things," but upon actually greeting his brother, "his feeling of disappointment vanished and was replaced by pity" (316). Thus Levin privately acknowledges Nicholas' powerful sway over him and admits that he fears the extent of his brother's influence, but because he is promptly consumed by pity and compassion when confronted by the emaciated figure of his ailing brother, he ultimately cannot escape this profound influence. In accordance with the recurring pattern that manifests whenever Levin spends time with his brother, his mind plunges deeply into thought the night after Nicholas' arrival, and he lies awake nearly all night contemplating "death, the inevitable end of everything," bemoaning that "I want to do something, and I had forgotten that it will all end in Death!" (318). As the novel's human embodiment of misfortune and death, Nicholas' presence haunts Levin because he does not yet know how to integrate suffering and death into his ideas about life. Nicholas repeatedly spurs Levin into profound contemplations, forcing him to confront difficult and often moribund topics that might not otherwise occupy his thoughts, but Nicholas' demise will eventually give Levin the opportunity to synthesize key notions of sickness and death into what he already knows about life. Thus while in this instance Nicholas' poor health and nearness to death confound and distress Levin, sending him spiraling into philosophical deliberations on the "new, insoluble" problem of death (319), Nicolas will ultimately provide philosophical resolution for Levin through his passing, and death will evolve from an insoluble problem to a natural part of life.

These ruminations on death and the impenetrable problems of life echo the end of the novel, when Levin comes close to suicide because he cannot find a suitable system of beliefs to endow his life with meaning. The crisis of existence that Levin undergoes in the novel's final

chapters, culminating with his discovery of true faith, has its roots in these earlier scenes when the presence of Nicholas provokes a strong intellectual response within him and commands him to address serious themes of death and G-d. Levin concludes his visit with Nicholas by thinking, "there is little to be happy about in this world" and, "he saw death and the approach of death in everything; but the work he had begun interested him all the more," (321) aptly demonstrating that through just one brief visit, Nicholas has induced him to reformulate his entire perspective on life, death, and work. Nicholas has such distinct influence on Levin that his very existence can profoundly alter the very way in which his brother views the world. In a sense Nicholas also serves as an intellectual muse for Levin, a source of inspiration to which he can turn to fuel his ponderings. Because Tolstoy ties Nicholas' character so closely to the specter of death, he implies that by extension, death itself is a muse for Levin. Yet whether the muse takes the specific form of an abstract entity or an earthly being, it propels Levin onward as a man of ideas in *Anna Karenina*. As he constantly occupies himself with some item of philosophy, Levin owes much of the motivation for these cogitations to Nicholas and everything that he represents.

It is not only Levin who reacts strongly to Nicholas, for we see that Kitty's first encounter with Nicholas at the Wells "inspired an irrepressible feeling of aversion in her," as she observed his "large dreadful eyes, which followed her insistently [and] expressed hatred and irony" (197). When she accompanies Levin to Nicholas' deathbed her feelings rapidly change, and she then feels pity for the invalid, experiencing, "a need for action, for finding out all the particulars of his condition, and a desire to help him" (449). In either case Kitty's response to Nicholas substantiates even further the potent impact that he has on Levin by reinforcing his status as a polarizing and thoroughly penetrating character that leaves a lasting impression on those who cross his path. At the deathbed it is Levin who feels "horror and repulsion," "choking

with sobs and unable to utter a word" (450). The reversal of roles and attitudes in this scene carries major significance because it causes Levin to understand that Kitty "knew surely what death was…knew without a minute's hesitation how to behave with the dying and did not fear them," while Levin and others like him who "were able to say a great deal about death, evidently did not know anything, for they feared it and had no notion what to do when people were dying" (450). Levin comes to realize that however virile his mind, however much he might know about death from his readings, and no matter what questions on the subject he might be intellectually able to confront, nonetheless he remains pragmatically helpless, for G-d has "hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes" (451). Not nearly so bogged down in the mire of heady ideas and existential concerns as her husband, Kitty experiences none of the resulting paralysis that so plagues Levin when the time comes for action. She thus gains a new level of respect and appreciation from Levin as he observes her remarkable ability to tend to Nicholas confidently and sensibly, addressing not only his physical but also his spiritual needs, and he comes to recognize that "all she did was well done" (452). Levin sees her in a new and favorable light in the days leading up to Nicholas' death, and this evolution in his view of her brings them closer to each other. Originally having rejected Kitty's request to join him at his brother's side, claiming "you will be in my way" (442) and annoyed that perhaps she loved him too much, Levin now experiences an intense upwelling of emotion after watching Kitty excel at her work for a few days and seeing how quickly his brother was able to find comfort in her presence while he himself was at a loss for what to say and do. He tells Kitty quite genuinely "I am very, very glad you came. You are purity itself," (453) and in this moment Levin and Kitty unite to connect on a deeper level, all of which is occasioned, albeit indirectly, by Nicholas. The novel's intricate connections between life and death are on

display again here, for by helping him to address the question of death Kitty increases her value in Levin's life. Similarly, it is in his time of death that Nicholas makes his final and most enduring contribution to Levin's life. Furthermore, an assertion of love for Nicholas ("because he loved the dying man more than the others did, Levin felt that lie most painfully (456)) precedes Levin's subsequent declaration of love for Kitty, as though Levin needed to affirm to himself his love for his brother and accept the pain of his death as a natural part of life before declaring later in the chapter the potent and inexplicable nature of his love with Kitty.

Nicholas' death renews in Levin's soul "that feeling of horror at the inscrutability, nearness, and inevitability of death," but these thoughts do not "drive him to despair" as they have previously, because "in spite of death, he felt the necessity of living and loving. He felt that love had saved him from despair, and that that love under the menace of despair grew still stronger and purer" (459). Levin loves Kitty even more at the moment of Nicholas' death than he has before, because he realizes that her love possesses a preserving power which has kept him afloat when he was in danger of drowning in his despondency. There is little question that Levin and not Kitty will wind up the novel's hero, but this does not fundamentally devalue the importance of her role in this particular episode. Levin has his wife to thank for sustaining through her presence and support his very capacity to live and to love in the face of death and confusion, and he owes an equal debt of gratitude to Nicholas for providing the very "menace of despair" that allows his love to grow "stronger and purer." Without Nicholas' suffering and death to give a physical form to Levin's moribund intellectual despair, he would have been deprived of the opportunity to forge a closer bond with Kitty. This new sense of togetherness between Kitty and Levin quickly gains a physical manifestation when the doctor confirms Kitty's pregnancy, prompting Levin to muse, "scarcely had the unexplained mystery of death

been enacted before his eyes when another mystery just as inexplicable presented itself, calling to love and life" (459). A life-cycle progression comes full circle, as one life ends only for another to begin -- sickness and death unexpectedly heralding of birth and new life. By placing Nicholas' death and the announcement of Kitty's pregnancy in immediate sequence within just a few lines of each other, Tolstoy suggests that Nicholas may have traded his life for that of Levin's child, thus completing a circle of mystery for Levin and helping to teach him how to love. This direct juxtaposition emphasizes to Levin that he need not fear death and can instead incorporate it organically into his conception of life, as the two are forever connected. The irony inherent in the fact that one of the more spiteful and loveless characters in the novel actually plays a large role in bringing two other characters together and introducing thoughts of love and new life into their minds only enriches Nicholas' unexpected role.

In *Anna Karenina,* Tolstoy molds and develops his secondary characters with dexterity; each one plays a critical role in the book no matter how few pages s(he) may actually traverse. Constantine's invalid sibling Nicholas Levin appears in only a handful of scenes before he vanishes entirely about halfway through the novel, yet because of the ways in which he represents death and the commanding influence he has on his brother, his effect on the book extends far beyond the limits of his physical presence. Functioning, among other roles, as a catalyst for the unification of Levin and Kitty and as a starting (and ending) point for Levin's frequent philosophical and ideological contemplations, Nicholas leaves an indelible stamp on *Anna Karenina* as he is paradoxically integral to the development of both the book's themes of love, life, and death.

Work Cited

Tolstoy, Leo. *Anna Karenina.* Translation: Gibian. New York: W.W. Norton, 1995.