

ANNA KARENINA

Leo Tolstoy

Overview

Leo Tolstoy was a towering figure of the Russian novel and short story, as well as a vocal and influential public figure. He is uniquely respected for his novel *Anna Karenina* (1873-1877) and for his huge novel/study of *War and Peace* (1869), which deals with five Russian aristocratic families, and the impact on them of the Napoleonic invasion of their country, during six months in 1812. Among the causes to which he devoted passionate attention were Pacifism and radical Christianity in the strict vein of The Sermon on the Mount. His arguments for radical Pacifism have had profound echoes in the public sphere, through the work of such men as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King.

Story

Anna Karenina is a novel about adultery in a highly placed Russian aristocratic family. Stiva, brother to Anna Karenina, has for the umpteenth time been found out in adultery by his wife, Dolly. Anna is the only one, in the end, who can mediate a resolution between the two. Meanwhile, Kitty, Dolly's sister, is being courted by two different but at the time fascinating guys. Vronsky, a dashing military officer, and the moody intellectual, Levin. In the end, and here is the focus of the novel, Vronsky falls in love with Anna, sister of Stiva; and the tragedy of love, which will finally destroy both Anna and Vronsky, is launched. The sad fact is that Anna is married to Karenin, and that he is not a friend of unorthodox social arrangements.

While Anna considers her infatuation, Vronsky relentlessly pursues her, following her back from Moscow to Saint Petersburg. Anna implores Vronsky to beg Kitty's forgiveness, for leaving her, but in response all he can or will say is that he loves Anna, and cannot be without her.

As the fatal affair between Anna and Vronsky brews, a parallel narrative develops around Levin, the intellectual former suitor of Kitty, Dolly's sister. Levin is an advanced agricultural and social critic, who works closely with the serfs on his estate, and is a thinker in line with the new Russia. After his temporary rejection by Kitty, he has retired to the country, but events bring those two one time lovers together again, and they marry. Levin will continue to factor throughout the novel. By the end of the book, Levin's married love for Kitty and for his son will provide the major axis for positive thinking about love.

The dark clouds of adultery begin to close around Anna, who has by this time given into Vronsky's pursuit. Her husband, Karenin, has refused to give her a divorce, and she has moved to the family country estate, where she has frequent opportunity to meet Vronsky, and discovers that she is pregnant with Vronsky's child. Vronsky is conflicted and for a while out of his mind.

With the unfolding of events, it happens that Karenin offers Anna a divorce, which she proudly refuses, and Anna and Vronsky take off for a pretty aimless unmarried tour in Europe; their passion for one another is weakening by the day. Their milieu is hostile to them; Anna is shunned like Hester Prynne in Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*. She snatches a moment for a tryst visit with her young son by Karenin, but apart from that she is an isolated and embittered figure, jealous of Vronsky, who suffers none of the moral obloquy that hits her.

The remainder of the novel, which includes substantial discoveries of Levin's thoughtfulness, and of his growing faith in god's hand, sees the ever sharper decline of Anna, who has by this time quarreled amply with Vronsky, and who sees no possibility of recovering her stable and respectable life of yore. She throws herself under the railroad tracks.

Like Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, written twenty years earlier, *Anna Karenina* is a fateful analysis of female passion adrift in a society jealously protective of its social norms. Neither woman stands a chance of happiness, once she cuts herself off rudderless in the sea of her society.

Themes

The chief theme is moral; **adultery** is costly. Tolstoy is a master at developing and sharing the mindset of Anna, in her world which is full of forgiveness and abundance, so long as the individual does not break the basic contract on which the society is founded. Anna, trapped with a husband who is chiefly about keeping up appearances, is not able to endure her marriage, and falls irresistibly to a handsome officer whose interest in her is superficial.

A second theme is that of the discovery of **family, peace, and love**. Levin is the chief example of this discovery, as he and Kitty surmount many bad patches in their relationship, in order to come out as a loving unit, close to the land.

Characters

Anna, who lives in the upper aristocratic zone of late feudal Russia, first meets us on a visit to her brother in Moscow. While there she falls in love with a dashing military officer, the handsome and well-mannered Vronsky. When she returns to St. Petersburg, after that visit, she discovers that Vronsky has followed her, and before long, as a hot affair develops between them, it becomes evident that she cannot remain with her pompous and unromantic bureaucrat husband. The novel proceeds to depict the gradual decline of this torrid affair, which produces one child and much suffering on all sides, into a hell for all concerned. In her own private hell, having lost her reputation and her beloved son, by her first husband, and having been unwilling to accept a divorce, Anna throws herself under a railroad car, and brings what was left of passion to a savage end.

Prince **Vronsky**. Vronsky is a handsome, dashing, egocentric military officer, who falls hard for Anna, and though they melt in a hot passion, for a short while, they are both concerned chiefly with their own pleasure, are not interested in sacrificing or even sharing; eventually they tear themselves to pieces.

Prince **Oblonsky**, Anna's brother, is a veteran of a long failing marriage, is a rampant philanderer, but is nonetheless one of the most human and attractive figures in this novel. Unfortunately, he cannot bring himself to share his knowledge of life with his sister, Anna.

ANNA KARENINA (passionate)

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Parallels The theme of adulterous passion is ancient and worldwide, both because the act of adultery is widespread; also because the actions of adultery generate literary strategies which command reader attention--suspense, anxiety, sense of personal guilt and desire. Literary adultery can be muffled in a large narrative frame, like the adultery of Helen and Paris, in the *Iliad*, which is always, as it were, seen from a distance. Or literary adultery, as in the *Tristram and Isolde* tale from mediaeval legend, may blend the fascination of a love potion with the bleak, in your face, actuality of sin. In modern fiction, as in modern life, adultery abounds: one might think of key narrative turns in *Anna Karenina*, which we discuss

here, *Madame Bovary*, or *The Scarlet Letter*, all novels in which the lures and consequences of adultery are ruthlessly anatomized. In each of these novels, as in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, the 'fallen woman' is drawn by passion and 'boredom' to break her marriage vows. In each case the social consequences of adultery—ostracism and loneliness—come down to crush the adulteress. Lady Chatterley remains in limbo, waiting for an endless divorce. Emma Bovary takes poison. Anna ends up crushed by a railway train.

Illustrative moments

Awareness Returning to Moscow, from the visit to her brother at which she had met Vronsky, Anna for the first time assesses the powerful new romantic experience she seems to have happened into. As the train jiggles along, her mind opens. 'What does it mean? Am I afraid to look it straight in the face? Why, what is it? Can it be that between me and this officer boy there exist, or can exist, any other relations than such as are common with every acquaintance?' She is just beginning to shake herself into an awareness of what is happening to her. Little does she imagine that Vronsky, feeling the same—from his angle of conquest—is aboard the same train, ready to track her to her lair.

Consummation The consummation of Anna's passion occurs less than one fourth through the huge novel, an indicator of how much relative attention will go into studying the *consequences* of Anna's passion. The actual act, which of course Tolstoy treats only as aftermath, comes as a tremendous shock to both lovers, and to Anna is largely a moment of despair. '...the louder he spoke, the lower she dropped her once proud and gay, now shame-stricken head, and she bowed down and sank from the sofa, down on the floor, at his feet...' 'My God, forgive me,' she said, sobbing, pressing his hands to her bosom. After the passion, the realization, of the to her earthshaking consequences of her action.

Son Anna's passion, which is initially the product of marital boredom and physical desire, leads to a loss of reputation, of family harmony, of inner peace, and, worst of all to her, to the loss of her son, who remains with Stepan, her husband, and whom her husband will withhold from her. 'When she thought of her son, and his future attitude toward his mother, who had abandoned his father, she felt such terror at what she had done, that she could not face it...' Her bind is simple and total: only by leaving Vronsky, forgetting her passion, and returning humbled to her husband, can she retrieve her son.

Confrontation It is not easy for Anna to clarify, to her husband, what her feelings toward Vronsky are, and why 'our relations cannot be the same as before....I cannot be your wife...' To fortify her failing resolve, she manages to flip her passion over into an aversion which 'extinguished her pity for him.' All she could feel now was fear, and contempt, as she 'saw once more those composed gestures,' and 'heard that shrill, childish, and sarcastic voice,' which represented all she had taken for granted, and gladly accepted, before she had fallen under Vronsky's spell.

Discussion questions

Quite unlike contemporary fiction writers Tolstoy seems to avoid any descriptions of physical-erotic action. Can you think of exceptions? Do bodies ever touch in *Anna Karenina*?

Is Anna a sexy babe or a complex and many-sided woman? What kind of wiles does she direct toward Levin, after she is beginning to cool toward Vronsky?

Does Anna's relation to Vronsky grow in richness, as they spend time living together? Do they have anything in common? What?

COUNT VRONSKY (closed)

Character Count Vronsky is a deeply embedded member of Petersburg society, true to the elite values of its upper crust, and raised for the military-elite career which shapes his behavior throughout Tolstoy's novel. Vronsky is handsome, witty, socially adept, and a magnet to the most charming women in his social milieu. He falls in love with Anna, on a visit initially directed to Anna's sister, Kitty, and from that point on he is smitten, first 'at first sight' but then with a deep sexual-possessive longing, which renders him totally indifferent to the impact he is having on Anna's stuffy husband. However Vronsky becomes isolated and increasingly unstable after the consummation of his sexual love for Anna. He is marginalized by his society, loses his panache and bravura, and declines into a suicidal state which matches Anna's. At the end, after Anna's suicide, Vronsky is spiritless and disappears into a military campaign against the Turks.

Parallels The charming seducer has a long history in western literature, and might well start with Paris, who seemingly had no trouble winning Helen away from a stodgy marriage, and into the vortex of war. The most cavalier of seducers, far from the rapidly tortured mind of Vronsky, is the Don Juan figure of (eventually) Molière and Mozart, who had his birthplace in Spain, from the pen of Tirso de Molina in 1630. Valmont, in Choderlos de Laclos' *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782), both delights in bed games and is a genius at spicing them up to the ladies' tastes; Casanova, in his posthumously published *Histoire de ma vie* (1822-1829), offers us the autobiography of a lifetime cultivator of well-crafted seduction, while Rodolphe, in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1836) knows just how to anticipate Madame's long overdue needs.

Illustrative moments

Fascinated From the outset of Tolstoy's novel, when he meets Anna at an elegant family party in Moscow, Vronsky is swept off his feet. He pays no attention to Anna's sister, Kitty, whom he is supposed to be destined for, and impetuously follows Anna back to St. Petersburg. Approaching her on the train, which she is taking home to her husband, Vronsky startles her with the remarks: 'What am I coming for?,' he repeated, looking straight into her eyes. 'You know that I have come to be where you are,' he said, 'I can't help it.' Such love at first sight, we suspect, will not survive for the long haul, and before long we begin to see the decline in this initial fascination.

Contemptuous 'In Vronsky's Petersburg world all people were divided into utterly opposed classes. One, the low class, vulgar, stupid, and above all ridiculous,' was locked into monogamous assumptions, one man one wife til death do us part, while the other class was open and free in its elegant approaches to passion and love. We soon see that, in the elite milieu Vronsky and Anna inhabit, the high flyers claim to love at the spur of attraction, but in fact, when seen up close, prove to be highly sensitive to their honor, their support systems, and the values generated by fidelity.

Obsessed Upon his return to Petersburg, and to his military officer environment of machismo, high living, flirtation, and the occasional field assignment, Vronsky began to plan his life around the possibility of meeting Anna, while avoiding Anna's increasingly upset husband. 'Vronsky was everywhere where he had any chance of meeting Anna.' The very furtiveness, of the relation of the two lovers, added savor to their cat and mouse game, as did the dangerous knowledge they both possessed, of the scandal threat which lay around every corner. Anna, of course, is already hearing serious grumbling from her husband, but Vronsky—he stupidly imagines to himself—is risking nothing more than renown for one more conquest.

Fulfilled? Vronsky was mistaken, to assume that consummating his physical desire for Anna would bring him happiness. It was not long, after that consummation, that social disapprobation, and the cold fury of Anna's husband, began to bring down their punishments onto Vronsky's head. From daring and triumphing bad boy he quickly became a topic of gossip, social exclusion, and moral disapproval. 'That which for Vronsky had been for almost a whole year the one absorbing desire of his life...had been fulfilled...' and he is left with the difficult consequences. Before long we will see Vronsky resign his

officer's commission, and leave Russia for extended travels with Anna in Europe. A loser, and a fairly good 'Sunday painter,' Vronsky loses the trick of life and fades.

Discussion questions

In drawing some parallels to Vronsky, above, we exhibited examples of slick and professional seducers. Did Vronsky belong in that group? Was he a seducer, or an obsessed lover?

How do you explain Vronsky's rapid fall—after his 'conquest' of Anna—out of social favor and even the favor of many of his military friends?

To be 'charming'—as in 'charming seducer'—you need to be a little vulnerable; women like vulnerability. Was Vronsky vulnerable? Was he charming?

PRINCE STEPAN OBLONSKY (Disagreeable)

Character Prince Stepan is the brother of Anna Karenina, and the husband of Dolly, with whom he has endless marital conflicts, but to whom he keeps hanging on, thanks to his inherent shallowness and delight in living for the pleasures of the moment. (Dolly meanwhile puts up with him, for 'the children,' and for appearances.) The prince enjoys fine eating and good looking women more than he regrets his shallow behavior, and therefore muddles on through a life in which on the whole he succeeds (in his careers), is well liked, and cannot manage terminally to disengage from his wife. Even when it comes to the divorce of Anna, his sister, he is unable for long to concentrate on the pain and gravity in front of him.

Parallels The term 'playboy' hit the headlines of literature with Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* (1907), and from that time on has served as a kind of rough cliché for the personality type we find in Prince Stepan Arkadyevitch: a person of natural charm, sexual attraction to women, and, probably, a low barrier of familial responsibility. The mind teems with examples, from the last century in cinema and high public life: Errol Flynn was both a real and a screen ladies man, James Bond was and continues to be a danger and sharpie on screen, in worlds (*La Dolce Vita*) of the sort that Fellini gives immortal expression to; while public figures as charismatic as Silvio Berlusconi and John F. Kennedy, have shown us how to mix international politics with the backdoor boudoir.

Illustrative moments

Truthful Stepan Arkadyevitch is unable to deceive himself, about the kind of person he is. He is 'a truthful man in his relations with himself. He was incapable of deceiving himself and persuading himself that he repented of his conduct.' Honesty of this sort sufficed to put Stepan at ease with himself, and more than sufficed to make him popular, for in his presence others felt that life was essentially there to enjoy. Nothing about Stepan was censorious or critical, with the result that, though he remained a pretty jolly good timer, he was socially radiant and attractive, even when it came to sympathy with his failings.

Chaotic Thanks to his marital conflicts Stepan frequently lives through periods of domestic disorder. The novel opens on such a scene: 'The wife did not leave her own room, the husband had not been at home for three days...the children ran wild all over the house.' Stepan's way of dealing with this chaos was to stay away from home, whenever possible at his club, where he could commiserate with other victims of the ardors of marriage. Never, though, did Stepan take the eye off the ball of his investments and business related contacts, which—along with his mistresses-- guaranteed a fundamental (and for him sufficient) stability in the vortex of daily life'

Fatuous Stepan manages conflict well, when he is away from the home, at his club, but he is predictably confused, when he has to face up to his wife—who, as he knows, will never dump him. 'Instead of being hurt, denying, defending himself, begging forgiveness, instead of remaining indifferent even, his face assumed its habitual, good-humored, and therefore idiotic smile...' Tolstoy's ruthlessly accurate eye for behavior, pins Stepan to the wall. He recognizes both Stepan's ridiculous position, and

the guy's invulnerability inside the game rules of the social world he inhabits. The sad fact is, Tolstoy shows us here the pathos in which Dolly is admired, unable to live with or without her husband.

Mystery The mystery is, what is it about people like Stepan that makes people like them? Review the case: 'Although Stepan Arkadyevitch was completely in the wrong as regards his wife, and was conscious of this himself, almost everyone in the house...was on his side.' Even his chief house servants, who had seen the development of Stefan's recent affair, winked at him over the matter, and Dolly, by hanging out in seclusion, simply provoked the hostility of the other ladies' maids, who were extra preoccupied with rounding up the kids. In a world where many grumble, those who simply enjoy life can get away with murder.

Discussion questions

Is Stepan a faithful brother to Anna, in her time of crisis when she is separating from Vronsky? When he must, is Stepan capable of understanding the depth of the human situation?

Is Stepan an evil man? Is he capable to taking decisions which would lead to hurting other people?

What seems to be Tolstoy's attitude toward Stepan? Is Tolstoy critical of this person he created? Does he understand Stepan deeply?

Reading

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