

ANNA KARENINA

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Anna Karenina (in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*) passionate

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.

Character 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 refused a divorce, Anna throws herself under a railroad car, and brings what was left of passion to a savage end.

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

1 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.

2 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.

3 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.

4 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?

Reading

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