

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

VRONSKY

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Count Vronsky (in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*) closed

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 Tolstoy devoted passionate attention were Pacifism and radical Christianity in the strict vein of Jesus Christ's The Sermon on the Mount. Tolstoy's 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 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?