

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

## PRINCE STEPAN OBLONSKY

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Prince Stepan Oblonsky (in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*) Disagreeable

**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** 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 sharp 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?