

# ANNA KARENINA

by Leo Tolstoy



## THE AUTHOR

Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) lost his parents before the age of ten, and was raised by an aunt. He briefly studied law, later fought in the Crimean War, and began his professional writing career with the publication of *Sevastopol Sketches* in 1855. In the late 1860's, his reputation was firmly established with his epic *War and Peace*. His second great novel, *Anna Karenina*, was published in serial form between 1875 and 1877.

In addition to his novels, Tolstoy wrote plays and short stories, as well as producing reading curriculum for the Russian public school system. His personal life, however, was one of continual struggle and depression. His search for the meaning of life brought periodic spasms of joy like that experienced by Levin in *Anna Karenina*, but Tolstoy fell back again and again into black periods of despair. He considered himself to be a Christian, but his ethical brand of Christianity required none of the traditional doctrines of the Russian Orthodox Church, which excommunicated him for his liberal views.

Tolstoy was influenced by the prevailing philosophies of his day, especially the teachings of Immanuel Kant, and was equally concerned with the social changes occurring in Russia. The liberation of the serfs had brought about major changes in Russian life, with farming becoming increasingly difficult, the influence of the aristocracy waning, and the restlessness of the newly-freed serfs hanging like a cloud over the future of the country. Tolstoy's books deal primarily with the life of the aristocracy, and reflect the essentially conservative values of that somewhat reactionary group (though at the same time challenging those values). Despite what we know from hindsight about the growth of Marxist thought during this era, his works see communism as little more than a minor view among many competing political and economic theories.

## PLOT SUMMARY

Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* is a narrative of life among the Russian aristocracy in the 1870's, and centers around three couples. Anna is married to Karenin, an important government official who provides all the comforts she could ever desire, but is a cold and inattentive husband. She meets and falls in love with the dashing Count Vronsky, a soldier with whom she ultimately has an affair. When she has a child by Vronsky, she leaves her husband and her young son, taking her daughter with her and moving in with the Count. Karenin refuses to give her a divorce, however, and this places her in the position of a "fallen woman," and thus a social outcast. Vronsky, as a man,

faces no such disability, and is free to move around in society while Anna must stay home, shunned by all but a few close friends. Eventually this poisons her relationship with Vronsky, who becomes increasingly tired of her jealousy and recriminations. Anna, able to handle her guilt and isolation no longer, throws herself under the wheels of a train.

The second couple is Anna's brother, Stepan Oblonsky, and his wife Dolly. Oblonsky is a minor government functionary who is frequently unfaithful to his wife, irresponsible with money, and depends on the favor of friends for continued employment. Ironically, Dolly is convinced to stay with her husband when she finds out about his infidelity by Anna. She pours her life into their six children, remaining with her husband in a dull, loveless marriage. She is Kitty's older sister.

The third couple is Constantine and Kitty Levin. Kitty is Dolly's youngest sister, and originally rejects Levin's offer of marriage because she takes Vronsky's flirting with her seriously. When she recognizes Vronsky's duplicity, she accepts Levin's renewed offer, and they marry and live very happily on Levin's estate in the country, producing a young son adored by both parents. Levin is a thoughtful young man who ponders constantly the plight of the peasants, and attempts to write a book that he thinks will revolutionize farming in Russia. He considers himself an unbeliever, but this bothers him, because it leaves him with no meaning in life. He finally is converted through a conversation with a peasant, during which he comes to see that meaning in life comes from living for others rather than for oneself.

## **MAJOR CHARACTERS**

- Anna Karenina - An intelligent, beautiful woman in her late twenties, Anna is trapped in a dull marriage to a prominent government official. She is a passionate woman whose inner self is tapped by the dashing Count Vronsky. She falls in love with Vronsky, has an affair and becomes pregnant, leaves her husband and son, becomes a social outcast, and finally in despair throws herself under the wheels of a train.
- Alexey Alexandrovich Karenin - Anna's husband, a cold, cunning top-level bureaucrat in Petersburg. He loves her to the extent to which he is able, but he cannot match her passion. He is helpless to cope with her adultery, and though he forgives her, he continues to manipulate events in order to make her situation impossible to endure.
- Sergey Alexeyich Karenin (Serezha) - Anna and Karenin's young son, who is eight years old when his mother leaves with Vronsky. Despite the fact that his father tells him that his mother is dead, he continues to love her and hold out hope that they can be together again.
- Count Alexey Kirilich Vronsky - Rich, handsome soldier and man about town, he flirts with Kitty, develops an all-consuming passion for the married Anna, and eventually leads her into an affair. He loves Anna deeply, but values his masculine freedom even more. He freely mixes in society after Anna becomes an outcast, which eventually contributes to the souring of their relationship and Anna's suicide.

- Constantine Dmitrich Levin (Kostya) - A wealthy country nobleman who owns a large farm, he feels out of place in the big city. He haltingly woos Kitty, is rejected because she expects an offer from Vronsky, but later proposes again and is accepted. They live a happy life together on Levin's farm, where he tries to establish good relationships with his peasants and writes a book about farming in Russia. He struggles with his unbelief, and is converted near the end of the book.
- Princess Catherine Alexandrovna Shcherbatskaya (Kitty) - The youngest daughter of Prince Shcherbatsky and his wife, Kitty is beautiful, naive, and pure of heart. She falls in love with Vronsky when he flirts with her, and rejects Levin because of it. When Vronsky runs off with Anna, Kitty gladly accepts Levin's second proposal. They live happily in the country and have a son.
- Prince Stepan Arkadyevich Oblonsky (Stiva) - Anna's brother, a charming rascal who gets by in life on his good nature. He is constantly unfaithful to his wife, irresponsible toward his children, careless with money, and dependent on friends to sustain his income. He is hard to dislike, however, because he is so warm-hearted and caring toward his friends.
- Princess Darya Alexandrovich Oblonskaya (Dolly) - Oblonsky's wife and Kitty's sister. She is hurt by Stiva's infidelity, but remains with him for the sake of their six children. She is a devoted mother and sister.
- Prince Alexander Shcherbatsky - Kitty and Dolly's father, an intelligent old man who loves his daughters dearly. He sees through Vronsky from the start, and supports Kitty's marriage to Levin.
- Princess Shcherbatskaya - Kitty and Dolly's mother, a schemer who is always trying to advance the standing of her daughters.
- Nikolai Levin - Constantine Levin's brother, a tuberculosis-ridden shadow of a man who has ruined his life with drink and dissipation. Kostya seeks out and restores his relationship with his brother, then cares for him as he approaches death. Nikolai's death sends Kostya into a period of deep spiritual introspection.
- Maria Nikolaevna - Nikolai's lover, a woman of the streets.
- Sergey Ivanich Koznyshev - Levin's half-brother, a well-respected Moscow intellectual.
- Agatha Mikhaylovna - Constantine's former nurse, now housekeeper at his country estate and foil for his ideas about farming and life in general.
- Countess Lydia Ivanovna - A shallow Petersburg aristocrat who adopts whatever ideas happen to be fashionable at the moment. Toward the end of the story, she becomes Karenin's comforter and protector, drawing him into an ecstatic form of Christianity mixed with spiritism that was sweeping Russia at the time.

- Princess Elizabeth Federovna Tverskaya (Betsy) - A cousin of both Anna and Vronsky, she is a “modern woman” who has an affair of her own and facilitates Vronsky’s relationship with Anna.
- Nikolai Ivanich Svyazhsky - Owner of a large estate in Levin’s province, he claims to be interested in modernizing Russia, but in practice adheres firmly to the old traditional methods of farming.

## NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” (p.7)

“She felt so sinful, so guilty, that nothing was left to her but to humiliate herself and beg forgiveness; and as now there was no one in her life but him, to him she addressed her prayer for forgiveness. Looking at him, she had a physical sense of her humiliation, and she could say nothing more. He felt what a murderer must feel, when he sees the body he has robbed of life.” (p.140-141)

“‘There,’ she said to herself, looking into the shadow of the carriage, at the sand and coal-dust which covered the sleepers - ‘there, in the middle, and I will punish him and escape from every one and from myself.’” (Anna, p.693)

“He could not admit that at that moment he knew the truth, and that he was now wrong; for as soon as he began thinking calmly about it, it all fell to pieces. He could not admit that he was mistaken then, for his spiritual condition then was precious to him, and to admit that it was a proof of weakness would have been to desecrate those moments. He was miserably divided against himself, and strained all his spiritual forces to the utmost to escape from this condition.” (referring to Levin, p. 710)

“Reasoning had brought him to doubt, and prevented him from seeing what he ought to do and what he ought not. When he did not think, but simply lived, he was continually aware of the presence of an infallible judge in his soul, determining which of two possible courses of action was the better and which was the worse, and as soon as he did not act rightly, he was at once aware of it.” (referring to Levin, p.714)

“Where could I have got it? By reason could I have arrived at knowing that I must love my neighbor and not oppress him? I was told that in my childhood, and I believed it gladly, for they told me what was already in my soul. But who discovered it? Not reason. Reason discovered the struggle for existence, and the law that requires us to oppress all who hinder the satisfaction of our desires. That is the deduction of reason. But loving one’s neighbor reason could never discover, because it’s irrational.” (Levin, p.719)

“I shall go on the same way, losing my temper with Ivan the coachman, falling into angry discussions, expressing my opinions tactlessly; there will be still the same wall between the holy of holies of my soul and other people, even my wife; I shall still go on scolding her for my own terror, and being remorseful for it; I shall still be as unable to understand with my own reason why I pray, and I shall still go on praying; but my life now, my whole life apart from anything that can happen

to me, every minute of it is no more meaningless, as it was before, but it has the positive meaning of goodness, which I have the power to put into it.” (Levin, p.736)

## ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. The character of Levin is widely acknowledged to be a surrogate for the author in Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. What does his role in the narrative, and especially his conversion at the end of the book, tell you about Tolstoy's personal struggles, and the way in which he was able to come to terms with those struggles and achieve a satisfying view of life and the world around him?
2. Critics have often noted that Leo Tolstoy, in his book *Anna Karenina*, portrays the title character in a way that elicits pity rather than scorn. Is Tolstoy's sympathetic portrayal of Anna more an indication of his insight into the fallibility of human nature, or is it more a critique of society's double standard of morality? Why do you think so?
3. Tolstoy was excommunicated by the Russian Orthodox Church because his views were considered too liberal, and his rejection of fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith as nonessential put him beyond the pale of what the church considered acceptable. In the light of this fact, consider the description of Levin's conversion in *Anna Karenina*, and compare what is conveyed about the author's understanding of Christianity to what you know about the Social Gospel movement.
4. Immanuel Kant's epistemology had a major influence on thinkers of the nineteenth century. Analyze the impact of Kant's thought on the view of Christianity presented in Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*.
5. Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* portrays many varieties of Christian profession and practice. Some of these are pictured by Tolstoy as being "good" while others are presented in a negative light. Choose two characters from the book, one a "good" Christian and one a "bad" Christian, and use the contrast between the two to discuss Tolstoy's view of the essence of true Christianity.
6. Discuss the view of marriage presented in Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. What does the author think provides the basis for a good marriage? What are the consequences of unfaithfulness to one's marriage vows?
7. In Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, the author ponders at considerable length, through the character of Levin, the economic problems of Russia. What does Tolstoy believe is wrong with the aristocracy? the peasantry? What must be done to make Russia a better and more just society?

8. What is the symbolic significance of the horse race in which Vronsky is injured in Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*? How do the events surrounding the race reveal key aspects of the characters of the people involved?
9. Discuss the theme of the opposition of social institutions and personal feelings in Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. Choose two characters, and compare and contrast the roles played by society and passion in their lives.
10. In late nineteenth century Russia, many among the aristocracy were arguing about whether Russia's destiny lay with emulating the successes of the West or seeking their own unique future as a peculiarly Slavic people. In what ways is this debate reflected in Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, and what side does the author take on this question? What makes you arrive at this conclusion?
11. Compare and contrast the lives of Levin and Kitty and Vronsky and Anna while both couples are living in the country in Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. What do the contrasts underscore about Tolstoy's views of love and marriage, the inner life and outer life?
12. In Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, why is Anna ultimately unable to trust Vronsky? What does this indicate about the nature of guilt and fidelity and their impact on relationships?
13. Romans 12:19 says, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay." This verse serves as an epigraph in Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. Why did Tolstoy choose this verse, and how does it capture a major theme of the novel?
14. According to Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, what should be the relationship between love and marriage? What often causes the two to conflict? When they conflict, where does the individual's allegiance lie?
15. In what way does the portrayal of Christianity in Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* illuminate what he was intending to say in his famous short story *Martin the Cobbler*?
16. Both Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* are stories of marital unfaithfulness, yet they treat their subject in vastly different ways. Discuss the different views of human nature, morality, responsibility to society, and personal fulfillment presented by Chopin and Tolstoy in their respective novels.
17. Compare the conversion experience at the end of Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* with Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. How do the conversions of Charles and Levin reflect the Catholic and Russian Orthodox versions of Christianity held by the respective authors? With which, in the light of your own Christian experience, can you identify most readily?
18. Consider the treatment of adulterous women found in Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, and Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. Which differs most from the others? How would you explain these differences?

19. Compare and contrast the ruinous consequences of marital unfaithfulness in John Galsworthy's *The Forsyte Saga* and Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. How do the affairs of Irene and Anna have consequences that extend far beyond their own personal lives? Which of the stories portrays the devastating results of adultery in a more biblical fashion? Why do you think so?
20. Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* both deal tangentially with the relationship between the aristocrats and the serfs in Russia. Compare and contrast the treatment of the subject in the two novels. Did the author's thought on the subject change in the decade between the two novels? Was it affected by the consequences of the freeing of the serfs by Alexander II in 1861 as they began to appear over time?
21. Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* and Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* are love stories built around immoral relationships. Do the authors view the relationships between the pairs of lovers as immoral? Why or why not? To what extent does the fact that their love takes place outside of marriage contribute to the tragedies with which the novels end?
22. Compare and contrast the attitudes toward suicide in Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter* and Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. The two protagonists both take their lives because they are unable to deal with the complications of extramarital affairs and believe they have no choice. Do you agree? Are their motives really similar? Cite details from both works of literature to support your arguments.