Anna Karenina
by Leo Tolstoy
Tolstoy’s life

• Count Leo Nikolaevich Tolstoy was born into a noble family in 1828. Tolstoy's youth was spent among the world of the upper-class gentry during the last decades of serfdom in Russia. Throughout his life, Tolstoy felt torn between his own conflicting attitudes regarding the future of Russia and those of his noble class. By the time Tolstoy was in his early thirties he had discarded most of the trappings of gentry life and was spending much of his time working with and teaching the peasants of his estate, not unlike his character Levin in Anna Karenina. The writer also became concerned about other pressing social issues of his period, many of which appear in the pages of this novel.

Lev Tolstoy in Yasnaya Polyana", 1908, the first color photo portrait in Russia.

Real life inspiration

• In 1872 a neighbor of Tolstoy's cast off his mistress, Anna Pirogova. The railroad had recently been extended into the province, and in her despair at the failed relationship, Anna rushed down to the tracks and threw herself under a train. The corpse was taken to a nearby engine shed, and Tolstoy, hearing of the incident, rode over to view the remains. Tolstoy had never known the woman, but her tragic suicide inspired the story of Anna Karenina's failed liaison with Vronsky and her subsequent suicide in the novel.

• The death of Dmitry Tolstoy from tuberculosis in the arms of his prostitute lover served as the model for the death of Nikolai Levin in the novel.

• Just like Levin and Kitty in the novel, Tolstoy and his fiancée, Sonya Bers, exchanged diaries prior to their wedding. The frantic scene in the novel in which Levin has no shirt to wear for his wedding is based on an incident that occurred on the day of Tolstoy's own wedding to Sonya.

• Also, the ideas of Levin in the novel concerning the condition of peasants and his enjoyment of farm life reflect Tolstoy's own experiences. Though he belonged to the most privileged class in society, Tolstoy spent most of his time at Yasnaya Polyana, his rural estate. Dressed in rough peasant clothing, he would work with the peasants in the field. Like Levin, Tolstoy dreamed of renouncing his title and wealth and living as they did.

Early drafts of Anna

• In the first drafts of Anna Karenina, Anna is fat and vulgar. Tolstoy has just seen the adulterous woman destroyed by the train and sets out to condemn her.

• “In the first drafts of Anna Karenina, Tolstoy conceives a pretty woman who attracts men but is not a complete woman. She doesn't know how to dress, she has bad manners.”

• But as Tolstoy wrote, Anna took over, as characters do, becoming beautiful, while her originally blameless husband becomes stuffier and less appealing--although he becomes humane.

Peasants and landowners

• When Czar Alexander II came to power in 1855, he launched an era of reform. The upper-class politicians stalled the work intentionally and Leo Tolstoy, an ardent proponent of abolishing serfdom, was furious: “Wherever one turns in Russia, one sees that everything is beginning to change—but the men in charge are old and therefore incompetent.”

• In 1861, after five years of political wrangling, an imperial manifesto was issued abolishing serfdom.

• As peasants realized things still hadn’t changed, there were riots. These uprisings were mercilessly quelled by government troops, and by 1865 they had ceased completely.

• The ineffectiveness of the government reform is reflected in Anna Karenina. Though the story takes place about ten years after the emancipation, the peasants still work and live in poverty under legal conditions that keep them attached to the land of their masters.

Russian history in *Anna Karenina*

- The zemstvos eventually proved effective but during the time of *Anna Karenina* the local government meetings were caught up in interpersonal feuding and lack of authority.
- The decline of large-scale farming was tied to a reliance on outdated farming methods, a lack of new technology, and a shortage of capital. The wealth of the nobility declined accordingly, despite measures like the 1861 serf emancipation which gave nobles subsidies for transferring lands to former serfs.
- Nineteenth-century Russia gave the husband complete legal power in a marriage. By imperial law, a wife had “to obey her husband as the head of the family, to live with him in love, respect, and unlimited obedience and to render him all pleasure and affection as mistress of the household.” Divorce was difficult to obtain and women had few options, with the controversies brought out in stories of the times.
- Though on the surface the love triangle in *Anna Karenina* resembles the more radical works of the time, Tolstoy's plot promotes a real, rather than a dishonest, commitment to marriage, and the genuine happiness that this type of relationship can bring.

Women in Transition

- In *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy provides three different models of wedlock: the marriages of Dolly and Stiva Oblonsky, Anna and Alexei Karenin, and Kitty and Konstantin Levin.

- The only socially acceptable ways for Russian women to gain respect and prominence in society was through marriage, motherhood, and “appropriate” work. Four to five children was an average number for married women. In peasant families, wives worked with their husbands in the fields and performed household chores. An upper-class woman, besides supervising household servants, was responsible for maintaining her family's social position through dinners, parties, and other gatherings.

- Tolstoy subscribed to the belief that the greatest duty of women was to bear children and raise families. Marriage was losing significance among progressive Russians at the time, largely because the church so strongly opposed divorce. It is perhaps this social trend that Tolstoy's novel aims to combat.

Semi-positive review of *Anna Karenina*

- "Anna Karénina" (1875-1877) was first published in a Russian review. It is the most mature and probably the greatest of the products of its author's imagination. Unlike "War and Peace" it is purely domestic in its subject matter, but there is no lack of variety in its scenes and characters. It is, indeed, a world in itself, so comprehensive is its grasp, and so intimately does it bring us into relations with the manifold aspects of country and city life in Russia.

- Were this work the sole available document, it would be possible to construct from its pages a great deal of Russian contemporary civilization. It is, of course, realistic to the last degree. But its realism is not confined to minute descriptions of material objects, and is no less made use of in the treatment of emotion. There are few works of art in which the art is so well concealed; few works of fiction which give so strong a sense of reality as this. We seem to look upon life itself and forget the medium of the novelist's imagination through which we really view it. And right here we are brought to compare the methods of Tolstoy with those of his better known and unquestionably greater countryman, Tourguénieff.

- The work of Tourguénieff surpasses the work of Tolstoï, in revealing that final sublimation of thought and imagination which give to it an artistic value beyond that of almost any other imaginative prose. Tolstoy lacks this power of concentration and this unerring judgment in the choice of word or phrase. He cannot sum up a situation in a single pregnant sentence, but he can present it with great force in a chapter. Now that this story of "Anna Karénina" has been brought to the cognizance of the western world, it is not likely to be soon forgotten. It will be remembered for its minute and unstrained descriptions, for its deep tragedy, unfolded act after act as by the hand of fate, and for its undercurrent of gentle religious feeling, never falling to the offensive level of dogmatism, yet giving a marked character to the book, and revealing unmistakably the spiritual lineaments of the Russian apostle of quietism. (pp. 13-14)

- Note: Turgenev's novel *Fathers and Sons* (1862) is regarded as one of the major works of 19th-century fiction.

A critical review from 1879

• “Such is the moral and social creed of this great poet of Russian aristocracy. The reader will not be slow in detecting all its shallowness. An author who says to the class he represents: “You are estranged from the rest of the people—you are by nature lazy and indolent, that is true, but no matter; be still more indolent, retire once for all from public life, bury yourselves in your families, on your estates, and you shall be saved!”—such an author is unconsciously writing a bitterer satire on that class than any of its most implacable enemies could have done.”

Understanding Anna

• It is generally assumed that Anna deteriorates and commits suicide because she cannot have her lover and her son too, or because she felt unloved by Karenin, or because a highly conventional and restrictive society has punished her for her sexual boldness by ostracization.
• Tolstoy has so constructed the novel that it is impossible to settle on one single reason.
• Karenin is incapable of giving Anna the love that she craves, but he does on occasion—the deathbed scene is an example—offer her love and affection. It is true also that Anna loves her son and, at least at the end of the novel, she cannot have both lover and son, especially in the society she lives in. But when Anna is happy with Vronsky, she does not think of her son.
• Tolstoy is careful to qualify any cause or motive that we might settle on. What drives Anna to misery and death is far deeper and more complex than any specific motive.
• What is not in dispute is that Anna is perhaps the greatest female creation of world literature and that her fate engages all our emotional and aesthetic responses. Her last day alive is unmatched in emotional intensity.

Public Reception of *Anna Karenina*

- The publication of *Anna Karenina* drove Russian readers into a frenzy. Nicholas Strakhov, a literary critic and admirer of Tolstoy's work, wrote to Tolstoy about the reception of an installment of *Anna Karenina* in the *Russian Herald*: “Everyone is dumb with admiration for the February issue. The January one was less popular.... Now there is a roar of satisfaction. It's as though you were throwing food to starving men” (Strakhov in Troyat, p. 369).

- Dostoyevsky found a deeper significance in *Anna Karenina* than did most Russians. He wrote of the novel: “The reader felt that there was a living truth, a most real and inescapable truth, which has to be believed.... The Russian reader has to be often reminded of this eternal truth.... This reminder was a good act on the part of the author—to say nothing about the fact that he executed it as a sublime artist” (Dostoyevsky in Hall, p. 447).

- While the majority of Russians praised *Anna Karenina*, there were a few critics who denounced Tolstoy's novel. One of the greatest detractors of the work was the Russian Ivan Turgenev, whose love-hate relationship with Tolstoy was legendary. “I do not like *Anna Karenina,*” wrote Turgenev, “despite some truly magnificent pages (the horse race, the hay-making, the hunt). But the whole thing is sour, it smells of Moscow and old maids, the Slavophilism and the narrow-mindedness of the nobility” (Turgenev in Troyat, p. 371).

Poetic References

SEARCHING
• I recall someone once admitting
• that all he remembered of Anna Karenina
• was something about a picnic basket,

• and now, after consuming a book
• devoted to the subject of Barcelona--
• its people, its history, its complex architecture--

• all I remember is the mention
• of an albino gorilla, the inhabitant of a park
• where the Citadel of the Bourbons once stood.
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of an albino gorilla, the inhabitant of a park
where the Citadel of the Bourbons once stood.
The sheer paleness of him looms over
all the notable names and dates
as the evening strollers stop before him
and point to show their children.
These locals called him Snowflake,
and here he has been mentioned again in print
in the hope of keeping his pallid flame alive
and helping him, despite his name, to endure
In this poem, where he has found another cage.
Oh, Snowflake, I had no interest in the capital of Catalonia--
its people, its history, its complex architecture--
no, you were the reason I kept my light on late into the night,
turning all those pages, searching for you everywhere.

Sequels?

• At the Eightieth Anniversary Celebration of the Authors Guild, in New York City in 1993, several writers were asked to rewrite the ending to Tolstoy's Anna Karenina as if Anna had not thrown herself under a train.

• Garrison Keillor presented a humorous sequel in which Anna moves to New York, NY, blames her suicidal despondency on low blood sugar and advertises for a new lover in the personal ads.

Movie adaptations

Anna Karenina (2012)
Directed by Joe Wright

Anna Karenina, a four-part British TV adaptation made in 2000 directed by David Blair

More adaptations:
1935: Anna Karenina (1935 film), the most famous and critically acclaimed version, starring Greta Garbo and Fredric March and directed by Clarence Brown.
1948: Anna Karenina (1948 film) starring Vivien Leigh, Ralph Richardson and directed by Julien Duvivier.
1997: Anna Karenina (1997 film), the first American version to be filmed on location in Russia, directed by Bernard Rose and starring Sophie Marceau and Sean Bean.
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