

# *Anna Karenina* is not about Anna Karenina.

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*Anna Karenina* is not about Anna Karenina. It is about the overarching family structure that ties the fabric of Russian society. It is about Anna as much as it is about Levin; tragedy as much as comedy. The full beauty of the family life, of human relationships, would be incomplete if *Anna Karenina* is only about Anna Karenina.

To be fair, Anna Karenina certainly occupies a significant role within the confines of the novel, but in this essay, I will make the explicit argument for why we should not focus merely on Anna's personal drama in order to appreciate the greater artistic goals Tolstoy mapped out in *Anna Karenina*. These artistic goals have resulted in the novel taking on the stylistic qualities of epic, as the detailed narrative of many characters unified in an exhaustive portrayal of life in Russia during Tolstoy's time make up for an ambitious and substantial piece of literature, one very much like an epic. Tolstoy's Anna Karenina, therefore, is as much novel as it is epic. In fulfilling his artistic goals to write more than just a tragedy about Anna, Tolstoy was able to settle on a greater epic where the fully happy family life and the perfect world was examined to completion.

Fundamentally, *Anna Karenina* is written to capture the soul of Russia, this soul being what Tolstoy believed to be a very nuclear structure of family life. Tolstoy presents the very soul of Russia as one predicated on familial relationships, These familial relationships, as Tolstoy noted in the opening lines, exhibit varying levels of success with all happy families happy in the same way and all unhappy families unhappy in their own way. When applying this rather witty adage in the context of the plot, Anna's tragedy is marked by familial unhappiness while Levin's story is marked by familial happiness.

By writing that each unhappy family is unlike in their *own* way while every happy family is alike in the *same* way, we can generalize Levin's happy life into the same model for all happy families, and we can only limit Anna's experiences of unhappiness to her specific family situation. Fundamentally, Anna is unhappy because she is torn between wanting the best out of two possible lifestyles. On one hand, she can choose to remain with her current husband Karenin, a rather dry, cold humorless Russian bureaucrat who Anna considers no more different from a machine. However, the major benefit of living with Karenin is that he offers her stability and high social status. Tolstoy also writes how together, Karenin and Anna have a son named Seryozha who Anna adores but Anna fears that her son will grow up to be like his father, a cold, unfeeling Russian bureaucrat who will judge Anna harshly. On the other hand, Anna elopes with Count Vronsky in the hopes of obtaining a second family life that could be happier than this current family arrangement she has with Karenin.

However, the possibility of a new familial life is not all that glamorous as it seems. Count Vronsky, for all his charisma, military status, and earnest nature, proves to be a rather aimless romantic who is unable to deliver during pivotal moments. Compared to Karenin,

Count Vronsky displays all the commendable attributes of bravery, passion, and warmth, all traits that Tolstoy himself considered to be very Russian traits. However, Count Vronsky is also one who fails to maintain grace under pressure, especially during moments when graceful behavior was paramount. In that critical racing scene where Vronsky rides Foo Foo, his prized but nervously tense horse, he carelessly rode too hard, breaking Foo Foo's back just moments before he was about to finish in first place. Foo Foo is shot out of its misery, a certain foreshadowing of what's to come when Anna later jumps into a relationship with Vronsky, Anna's unhappy familial life, therefore, can be seen and traced to the inherent imperfections of her husband Karenin and her lover Vronsky, and Anna can only be happy if she is able to experience the union of the benefits Karenin and Vronsky are able to provide her.

While Anna's family life is characterized by unhappiness is brought about her conflicting desires to obtain the best arrangement from two different family structures, Levin's family life is characterized by his wholehearted devotion to just one woman and one woman only – Kitty Shcherbatsky. While Anna is initially presented with so many options and so many suitors, Levin initially isn't presented with even one option at all. As witnessed in the iconic ballroom scene in the first part of the book, Anna is depicted as the focus of everybody's attention, dressed in that striking black dress, Having already been married to Karenin that esteemed but ever-cold Russian bureaucrat, Anna has already established herself as a coveted woman of high status. Even with her married status, she is able to attract the handsome and dashing Vronsky, who becomes simply enamored with Anna when dancing the mazurka. Such an enamourment where Anna and Vronsky see themselves in each other eyes signal to Kitty that Vronsky, the man she had intended to marry over Levin, effectively rejected her.

To make matters even bleaker for Kitty and Levin too, Kitty just rejected Levin moments before this ballroom dance because Kitty had initially anticipated Vronsky to court her. Thus, within this ballroom scene, we see a certain hierarchy of social status where Anna is ranked highest, then Vronsky second highest, then Kitty, and then poor Levin in the bottom of the social totem pole.

Interestingly enough, this hierarchy of social status is inversely related to how happy the characters become at the end of the novel. Anna, for one, endures the greatest unhappiness and tragedy of them all, and Levin, on the other hand, becomes the happiest and most fulfilled. This fulfillment once again ties to family life because Levin is able to raise healthy kids with Kitty and earn the great love of his peasants who he had worked so closely within all those gripping scenes of hay stacking (I really do mean gripping in the sincerest way possible).

All these extra details Tolstoy employs in building the world of *Anna Karenina* where different characters interact and implicitly rank themselves in the social hierarchy without the presence of Anna illustrate that Anna is not the center of all events. In fact, it is her constant desire to be the center of all possible worlds, for her husband and her lover to revolve around her that spells out her ultimate doom. This fact is brought about by the scenes of Levin farming which Tolstoy writes so profusely on. By diverting attention away from Anna and towards Levin during the hay stacking and farming scenes, Tolstoy is able to show a truer way to live life, a way to escape from the certain emptiness that surrounds unhappy people.

One could not have guessed how to best replicate a happy family structure by merely

looking at Anna Karenina. By presenting Levin in his full glory toiling ceaselessly in the fields and attending to his wife and children tenderly, Tolstoy is able to effectively outline the world he envisions to be ideal, where a happy family can be achieved for a particular individual. Therefore to read *Anna Karenina* for only Anna Karenina's tragedy would forgo the actual opportunity of learning what makes for a truly happy experience.

As a final point, we should not read *Anna Karenina* for the sole purpose of reading the tragedy because thematically, Anna Karenina touches upon greater ideas of significant life events central to the human experience, such as marriage, work, having kids, and participation in civic and communal activities. These four events are all events that have unfolded in Levin's story, but not quite so in Anna's story, as Anna never fully commits to developing greater meaning in marriage, work, her kids, and participation in civic and communal activities. She occupies the majority of her time vacillating between Karenin and Vronsky, whoever is best able to satisfy her needs for happiness in the present moment more. Such an attempt to alternate between these two men prove to be a futile attempt at happiness. The great tragedy of Anna is her inability to see through this futile transitioning between her husband and her lover amidst the changing circumstances that surround her – at the end, she simply has nowhere to transition but to transition to death. Her story taken by itself serves as a tragedy, but when unified with the triumphs of Levin, Anna's tragedy provides a truer picture of a world Tolstoy envisions to be worth living in. By learning Anna's tragedy and Levin's triumphs in *Anna Karenina*, we can develop better self-understanding for the individual principles to follow and the individual pitfalls to avoid in order make that idealized world of happiness a reality.