

Anna Karenina

by Leo Tolstoy · Language: EN

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Overview

Anna Karenina is a sweeping novel of Russian high society that interweaves the tragic love affair of Anna Karenina and Count Vronsky with the domestic life of Konstantin Levin and his wife Kitty. The story opens in the Oblonsky household, where Stiva's infidelity has thrown the family into chaos, prompting his sister Anna to travel from Petersburg to Moscow to mediate. On the train, she meets Vronsky, a dashing cavalry officer, and they are immediately drawn to each other. Anna returns to Petersburg, but Vronsky follows her, and their passionate affair becomes public, leading to Anna's social ruin and internal torment. Meanwhile, Levin, a country landowner, proposes to Kitty, who initially rejects him but later accepts after her own disappointment with Vronsky. The novel traces Levin's search for meaning through marriage, farming, and faith, contrasting his grounded life with Anna's increasingly desperate and isolated existence.

Tolstoy weaves a dense tapestry of themes: the hypocrisy of society, the nature of love, the institution of marriage, and the quest for a meaningful life. Anna's story unfolds as a tragedy of passion and social condemnation, culminating in her suicide by throwing herself under a train. Levin's story, by contrast, ends with a tentative peace as he finds spiritual fulfillment in his family and his work. The novel is renowned for its psychological depth, its vivid portrayal of Russian life, and its philosophical inquiries. It matters because it remains one of the most profound explorations of human relationships and the conflict between personal desire and social duty, and it is a cornerstone of realist fiction that continues to resonate with readers today.

Key Takeaways

- Anna Karenina illustrates the destructive power of social hypocrisy, as Anna's love affair is condemned while Stiva's is forgiven, showing that societal rules often favor men.
- The novel suggests that a meaningful life requires a balance between personal desires and social responsibilities, as seen in Levin's eventual contentment versus Anna's despair.
- Tolstoy uses the train as a recurring symbol of fate and death, from the accident at the start to Anna's suicide, highlighting the inescapable consequences of her choices.
- Levin's agricultural reforms and his philosophical quest show that work and connection to the land can provide a sense of purpose that romantic love cannot.
- The contrast between Anna's passionate but doomed love and Levin's patient, domestic love demonstrates that lasting happiness often comes from quiet commitment rather than grand passion.

- The novel portrays the double standard in society, where women are punished for infidelity while men face little consequence, a critique that remains relevant.
- Anna's tragic end serves as a warning about the dangers of letting passion override moral and social constraints, and the isolation that can result from defying society.

Chapter Summaries

Part 1

The novel opens with the Oblonsky household in disarray due to Stiva's affair with the governess. His wife Dolly is devastated, and Stiva invites his sister Anna to help reconcile them. Meanwhile, Levin arrives in Moscow to propose to Kitty, but she rejects him because she is infatuated with Vronsky. Anna meets Vronsky on the train, and they are immediately attracted. She reconciles Dolly and Stiva, then returns to Petersburg, with Vronsky following her. The part ends with Anna's husband, Karenin, noticing her agitation, and Levin retreating to his country estate, humiliated.

Part 2

Kitty falls ill after Vronsky's rejection and is sent abroad to recover. Anna and Vronsky begin their affair in Petersburg, but Anna feels guilt and jealousy. Vronsky, a cavalry officer, continues his military career while pursuing Anna. Karenin confronts Anna about her relationship, but she denies it. At a horse race, Vronsky's horse falls, and Anna's reaction reveals her love for him. Karenin, humiliated, demands that Anna maintain appearances. The part ends with Anna telling Karenin that she is Vronsky's mistress, and Karenin considering a duel but deciding against it.

Part 3

Levin continues his life in the country, focusing on farming and his philosophical musings. He visits his dying brother Nikolai, which deepens his thoughts on life and death. Anna, now pregnant with Vronsky's child, suffers from illness and guilt. Karenin, after initially considering divorce, is persuaded by his spiritual advisor to keep the marriage intact for the sake of their son. Anna gives birth to a daughter, but nearly dies from puerperal fever. In her delirium, she asks Karenin for forgiveness, and he agrees to forgive Vronsky, who attempts suicide but survives.

Part 4

Anna recovers, but her feelings for Vronsky return, and she and Karenin live in a cold, formal arrangement. Vronsky, now recovered, is determined to be with Anna. Karenin, after a brief period of Christian forgiveness, reverts to his rigid, bureaucratic self. Anna and Vronsky decide to flee to Italy, leaving Karenin with their son. Meanwhile, Levin and Kitty reunite and marry, beginning their life together in the country. The contrast between the two couples is stark: Anna's affair is socially condemned, while Levin's marriage is blessed.

Part 5

Anna and Vronsky travel to Italy, where they live a seemingly idyllic life, but Anna grows restless and bored. Levin and Kitty settle into married life, but Levin struggles with his new responsibilities and his jealousy. Kitty becomes pregnant, and Levin is overjoyed. Anna and Vronsky return to Russia, but Anna is shunned by society, and she becomes increasingly possessive and paranoid about Vronsky's love. Levin, meanwhile, experiences a spiritual crisis and begins to question the meaning of life, eventually finding solace in faith.

Part 6

Levin and Kitty have a son, Mitya, and Levin is deeply involved in his estate and his philosophical search. Anna and Vronsky live in the country, but Anna's isolation grows. She is denied entry into society, and Vronsky's career is affected. Anna becomes obsessed with Vronsky's fidelity, and their relationship deteriorates. Levin, in contrast, finds peace in his family and his work, though he still struggles with doubts. The part ends with Anna and Vronsky moving to Moscow, where Anna hopes to regain some social standing.

Part 7

In Moscow, Anna and Vronsky's relationship becomes increasingly strained. Anna is jealous of Vronsky's freedom and his social life. She begins to take morphine to sleep. Levin, visiting Moscow, meets Anna and is captivated by her charm, but he returns to Kitty, reaffirming his love. Anna, feeling trapped and desperate, has a final quarrel with Vronsky. She goes to the train station, and in a state of despair, throws herself under a train, killing herself. Vronsky is devastated and leaves for the war in Serbia.

Part 8

The final part focuses on Levin, who is grief-stricken by Anna's death and the war fever that grips Russia. He struggles with his faith and the meaning of life, but eventually finds a personal, non-dogmatic belief in God. He realizes that living for others, not for oneself, is the key to happiness. The novel ends with Levin and Kitty in their country home, with Levin finding contentment in his family and his work, while the memory of Anna's tragedy lingers as a cautionary tale.

Themes

- Social hypocrisy
- Love and passion
- Marriage and infidelity
- Search for meaning
- Double standards
- Fate and death

Notable Quotes

- "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." — Opening line of the novel, setting the theme of family and happiness.
- "He stepped on the rail, and then he remembered that he had to cross the track. He looked at the car, at the steps, and the memory of the man who had been run over that day came into his mind." — Anna's final moments before her suicide, recalling the earlier accident.
- "Vengeance is mine; I will repay." — Epigraph of the novel, suggesting divine judgment on Anna's actions.
- "I think... if it is true that there are as many minds as there are heads, then there are as many loves as there are hearts." — Anna's remark about love, showing her belief in the uniqueness of each love.
- "Respect was invented to cover the empty place where love should be." — Anna's bitter comment about her marriage to Karenin.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Anna Karenina about?

Anna Karenina is a novel about the tragic love affair between Anna Karenina and Count Vronsky, set against the backdrop of Russian high society. It also follows the parallel story of Konstantin Levin, a landowner who seeks meaning in marriage and rural life. The novel explores themes of love, betrayal, social hypocrisy, and the search for happiness.

Is Anna Karenina worth reading?

Yes, Anna Karenina is considered one of the greatest novels ever written. It offers deep psychological insight into its characters, a vivid portrayal of 19th-century Russia, and timeless themes about love, society, and personal fulfillment. Its complex narrative and philosophical depth make it a rewarding read for those who appreciate classic literature.

How does Anna Karenina end?

Spoiler: Anna, consumed by jealousy and despair over her deteriorating relationship with Vronsky, throws herself under a train and dies. Vronsky, devastated, leaves for war. Levin, having witnessed Anna's tragedy, finds peace through his faith and his family, realizing that living for others is the key to happiness.

Who should read Anna Karenina?

Anna Karenina is ideal for readers who enjoy classic literature, character-driven stories, and philosophical explorations of love and society. It is also a great choice for those interested in Russian history and culture. Its universal themes make it accessible to a wide audience, though its length and depth require patience and attention.

How long does it take to read Anna Karenina?

At an average reading speed of 250 words per minute, Anna Karenina, which has about 350,000 words, would take approximately 23 hours to read. This translates to about 2-3 weeks if you read for an hour a day. Many readers take longer due to the novel's dense prose and philosophical passages.