# Ana karenina

by Leon Tolstoi · Language: SQ

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## Overview

Anna Karenina is a sprawling epic of 19th-century Russian society, intertwining two central narratives: the tragic adulterous affair of the aristocratic Anna Karenina and Count Alexei Vronsky, and the philosophical journey of the landowner Konstantin Levin. Anna, trapped in a loveless marriage to the much older government official Alexei Karenin, finds passionate love with Vronsky, leading her to abandon her family and social standing. Her pursuit of this love ultimately results in her ostracization, despair, and tragic end, serving as a powerful critique of societal hypocrisy and the double standards applied to men and women.

Parallel to Anna's story, Levin struggles with existential questions about faith, love, family, and the meaning of life. His courtship and marriage to Kitty Shcherbatskaya, his efforts to improve the lives of his peasants, and his eventual spiritual awakening provide a contrasting vision of happiness and fulfillment rooted in traditional values and a connection to the land. Tolstoy uses these intertwined narratives to explore profound themes of love, infidelity, social convention, spiritual searching, and the complexities of human existence, making it a timeless masterpiece of psychological realism and social commentary.

## Key Takeaways

- True happiness is often found not in fleeting passion, but in enduring love, family, and a meaningful connection to one's community and faith.
- Societal judgment and hypocrisy can be devastating, especially for women who defy conventional moral codes.
- The pursuit of intense, romantic love, untempered by responsibility or societal acceptance, can lead to isolation and destruction.
- Meaning in life can be discovered through honest self-reflection, hard work, and a commitment to moral and spiritual principles.
- The complexities of human relationships require constant effort, understanding, and forgiveness to thrive.
- Tolstoy critiques the superficiality of urban aristocratic life in contrast to the perceived authenticity of rural existence.
- Personal freedom, when pursued without regard for others or consequences, can become a form of bondage.

## Chapter Summaries

**Part 1**

The novel opens with the Oblonsky family in crisis: Stiva Oblonsky has been unfaithful to his wife, Dolly. Dolly's sister, Kitty Shcherbatskaya, is courted by both Konstantin Levin and Count Vronsky. Kitty rejects Levin, hoping Vronsky will propose. Anna Karenina, Stiva's sister, arrives in Moscow from St. Petersburg to mediate the Oblonsky's marital dispute. At the train station, Anna meets Vronsky, and an immediate, powerful attraction sparks between them. A railway worker is accidentally killed, an omen. Vronsky, captivated by Anna, begins to pursue her, much to Kitty's disappointment and heartbreak.

**Part 2**

Kitty falls ill from her heartbreak and travels to a German spa for recovery, where she meets the charitable Varenka and begins to find solace. Meanwhile, Levin returns to his country estate, immersing himself in farming and philosophical reflections on life, death, and the meaning of existence. In St. Petersburg, Anna and Vronsky's affair deepens, becoming the subject of society gossip. Anna's husband, Alexei Karenin, grows suspicious and confronts her. At a public horse race, Vronsky falls and injures his horse. Anna's visible distress publicly exposes her affair to Karenin and society, confirming his fears.

**Part 3**

Levin continues his life on his estate, grappling with agricultural reforms, the challenges of managing peasants, and his ongoing search for spiritual and existential meaning. He considers marriage again, reflecting on his desire for family and a simple life. Dolly visits Anna at Vronsky's country estate, observing their unconventional life. She notes Anna's pregnancy and the social isolation Anna endures, despite Vronsky's devotion. Dolly feels pity for Anna, recognizing the moral and social complexities of her situation, and the sacrifices Anna has made for her love.

**Part 4**

Anna gives birth to Vronsky's daughter, Annie, and nearly dies. In her delirium, she asks Karenin for forgiveness, which he, in an unexpected act of Christian compassion, grants, even extending forgiveness to Vronsky. Overwhelmed by shame and despair, Vronsky attempts suicide but only wounds himself. Anna recovers and, unable to endure the hypocrisy of remaining with Karenin while loving Vronsky, decides to leave her husband and son, Seryozha, to go abroad with Vronsky and their daughter. Karenin struggles with his decision but ultimately agrees to a separation, allowing Anna to depart.

**Part 5**

Anna and Vronsky attempt to build a new life together in Italy, but Anna feels unfulfilled and isolated from society. They eventually return to Russia, where Anna faces social ostracism.

Meanwhile, Levin and Kitty marry, experiencing the initial joys and challenges of married life, including their first arguments and reconciliations. Kitty becomes pregnant. Levin continues his spiritual quest, grappling with faith and doubt, and finding solace in his work and family. Anna attempts to re-enter society by attending the opera but is publicly snubbed, highlighting her irreversible social downfall.

**Part 6**

Levin and Kitty's domestic life on the estate continues, marked by the everyday realities of marriage, including disagreements and moments of profound connection. Dolly visits Vronsky's estate again, observing Anna's increasing unhappiness, jealousy, and possessiveness towards Vronsky, intensified by her social isolation. Vronsky attempts to pursue his own interests, including politics and art, which Anna resents, feeling neglected. The chasm between them deepens despite their love. Levin's brother, Nikolai, dies, prompting Levin to confront mortality and the meaning of life and death.

**Part 7**

Kitty gives birth to their son, Dmitri (Mitya), bringing Levin immense joy and a profound spiritual awakening. He finds peace and understanding in faith, embracing simple truths and the goodness of life. Concurrently, Anna's despair and paranoia intensify. She becomes convinced that Vronsky no longer loves her, leading to increasingly desperate attempts to regain his affection and frequent, bitter arguments. She begins using morphine to cope with her emotional pain. Consumed by jealousy and a sense of abandonment, Anna makes a final, desperate journey to the train station, convinced Vronsky is leaving her.

**Part 8**

In a final act of despair, Anna throws herself under a train, ending her life. The aftermath of her suicide impacts Vronsky, Karenin, and the society that condemned her. Vronsky, consumed by grief and guilt, volunteers to fight in the Serbo-Turkish War, seeking death. Meanwhile, Levin continues his spiritual journey, finding a deeper understanding of faith, family, and the meaning of life. He accepts the complexities of good and evil, and the ongoing challenges of existence, ultimately finding a sense of peace and purpose in his commitment to his family and his estate.

## Themes

- Adultery and its consequences
- Societal hypocrisy
- Love vs. passion
- Faith and spiritual search
- Family and domestic life
- Rural vs. urban values

## Frequently Asked Questions

**What is Anna Karenina about?**

Anna Karenina tells the story of an aristocratic woman, Anna, who leaves her husband and son for a passionate affair with Count Vronsky. Her pursuit of love leads to social ostracization and tragedy. Interwoven is the story of Konstantin Levin, a landowner searching for meaning in faith, family, and rural life, offering a contrasting vision of happiness and fulfillment.

**Is Anna Karenina worth reading?**

Yes, Anna Karenina is widely considered one of the greatest novels ever written. It offers profound insights into human psychology, love, family, faith, and societal hypocrisy. Its rich characters, intricate plot, and timeless themes make it a deeply rewarding and thought-provoking experience, despite its length.

**How does Anna Karenina end?**

Spoiler: Anna Karenina ends tragically with Anna committing suicide by throwing herself under a train. Consumed by jealousy, paranoia, and despair over her isolation and perceived abandonment by Vronsky, she sees no other escape. In contrast, Konstantin Levin finds a spiritual awakening and a sense of peace in his family and faith, concluding the novel on a note of hard-won hope.

**Who should read Anna Karenina?**

Readers who appreciate classic literary fiction, psychological depth, and social commentary will find Anna Karenina immensely rewarding. It's ideal for those interested in the complexities of love, marriage, morality, and the search for meaning, as well as anyone who enjoys immersive historical narratives set in 19th-century Russia.

**How long does it take to read Anna Karenina?**

Reading Anna Karenina typically takes around 23-25 hours for an average reader. Given its substantial length, often exceeding 800 pages, it's a significant time commitment, but one that many find deeply enriching and worthwhile.

## Best Quotes

**“All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.”**

Part 1, Chapter 1

This iconic opening line sets the novel's central theme, suggesting that while happiness might be universal, the causes and manifestations of unhappiness are uniquely personal, foreshadowing the diverse marital and familial struggles explored in the book.

**“Vengeance is mine; I will repay.”**

Epigraph

This epigraph, from Romans 12:19, establishes a crucial moral and theological framework. It suggests that judgment and retribution belong to God, not to humans, highlighting the tragic consequences when characters, particularly society, attempt to impose their own moral judgments.

**“He stepped down, trying not to look at her, as if she were the sun, and he a mortal man, to gaze upon whom was fatal.”**

Part 1, Chapter 18

This describes Vronsky's intense first impression of Anna at the ball. It vividly conveys the immediate, almost fated, and dangerous attraction between them, foreshadowing the destructive power their love will unleash.

**“Respect was invented to cover the empty place where love should be.”**

Part 3, Chapter 13

Anna says this to Dolly, reflecting on her own marriage to Karenin. It reveals her profound dissatisfaction with a relationship based on duty and social propriety rather than genuine affection, explaining her yearning for passionate love.

**“I think... if it is true that there are as many minds as there are heads, then there are as many kinds of love as there are hearts.”**

Part 3, Chapter 13

Anna expresses this thought to Dolly, suggesting a relativistic view of love. It implies that love is not a singular, universal experience but rather a deeply personal and varied emotion, justifying her own unconventional feelings.

**“To forgive means to forget.”**

Part 4, Chapter 17

Karenin says this to Anna during a moment of profound emotional turmoil. It encapsulates his struggle with Christian forgiveness, revealing his inability to truly move past Anna's betrayal, despite his intellectual and spiritual efforts.

**“He had discovered that it was not the peasants who were stupid, but he himself.”**

Part 3, Chapter 12

This is Levin's realization while working on his estate. It marks a significant moment in his journey of self-discovery, where he sheds his intellectual arrogance and begins to appreciate the practical wisdom and simple truths of rural life.

**“The artist's task is to conceal art.”**

Part 5, Chapter 11

The painter Mikhailov states this to Anna and Vronsky. It's a profound statement on artistic philosophy, suggesting that true art should appear effortless and natural, hiding the labor and skill behind its creation.

**“He felt that he was not only a part of the world, but the world itself.”**

Part 7, Chapter 12

This describes Levin's spiritual awakening and connection to nature. It signifies his transcendence of individual ego and his profound realization of unity with the universe, bringing him a sense of peace and purpose.

**“She felt that she was sinking, and that she was sinking not into the water, but into the mud.”**

Part 7, Chapter 26

This powerful metaphor describes Anna's final moments before her suicide. It conveys her overwhelming despair, the feeling of being utterly bogged down and suffocated by her circumstances, with no hope of escape or redemption.

**“I am not a woman, I am a machine.”**

Part 7, Chapter 26

Anna utters this in her desperate internal monologue before her death. It reflects her dehumanization and alienation, feeling reduced to a mere instrument of fate or passion, stripped of her identity and agency by societal judgment and her own destructive emotions.

**“There are no conditions to which a man cannot become accustomed, especially if he sees that all around him are living in the same way.”**

Part 2, Chapter 1

This observation, often applied to Oblonsky's household, highlights the human capacity for adaptation and the powerful influence of social norms. It suggests how people can normalize even morally questionable situations if they are common.

**“What is right and what is wrong? What is good and what is bad? These are questions that torment me.”**

Part 8, Chapter 10

Levin's internal struggle with morality and ethics. This quote encapsulates his lifelong philosophical quest for truth and meaning, reflecting his deep intellectual and spiritual anguish in a world that often seems devoid of clear answers.

**“He needed to live, to love, and to believe.”**

Part 8, Chapter 10

This summarizes Levin's ultimate conclusion after his spiritual journey. It represents his discovery that true fulfillment comes from embracing life's fundamental aspects: active existence, genuine affection, and a simple, heartfelt faith.

**“It's not the form of marriage that matters, but the love that fills it.”**

This sentiment, often attributed to Levin's evolving understanding of marriage, reflects the novel's critique of superficial societal conventions versus genuine emotional connection. It underscores the importance of inner substance over outward appearance in relationships.

## Questions & Answers

**What is the central conflict in Anna Karenina?**

The novel explores the conflict between passionate love and societal expectations, particularly through Anna's tragic affair. It also contrasts this with the search for meaning, faith, and family life through Konstantin Levin's journey, highlighting the complexities of morality, happiness, and social norms in 19th-century Russia. The central conflict is often seen as the individual's desire for authentic happiness versus the constraints and hypocrisies of society.

**Who is Anna Karenina, and what is her initial situation?**

Anna Karenina is a beautiful, intelligent, and charismatic high-society woman in Moscow, married to the much older, high-ranking government official Alexei Alexandrovich Karenin. She has a young son, Seryozha. Initially, she is respected and admired, living a seemingly conventional and proper life, though one devoid of deep emotional connection with her husband, which sets the stage for her eventual affair.

**What is the significance of the novel's opening line, 'All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way'?**

This iconic line immediately establishes the novel's focus on family life and its inherent complexities. It suggests that while happiness might follow a common pattern, unhappiness is

unique to each family's specific circumstances, setting the stage for the diverse forms of marital and familial discord explored throughout the narrative, particularly Anna's and Oblonsky's, and contrasting them with Levin's eventual happiness.

**Why does Anna Karenina fall in love with Count Vronsky?**

Anna falls for Vronsky because he offers her the passionate, intense love and emotional connection that is absent in her marriage to Karenin. Vronsky's ardent pursuit, his youth, charm, and the sheer force of their mutual attraction awaken a deep emotional and physical desire in Anna, leading her to abandon her societal obligations for a love she perceives as true and fulfilling, despite its illicit nature.

**How does Alexei Alexandrovich Karenin react to Anna's affair?**

Karenin is initially shocked and deeply hurt by Anna's affair. His primary concern is maintaining his public image and avoiding scandal, rather than addressing the emotional void in their marriage. He attempts to impose strict conditions on Anna, then struggles with his Christian duty to forgive, eventually offering her a divorce which she, ironically, finds herself unable to accept, leading to further complications.

**What is the role of Konstantin Levin in the novel?**

Konstantin Levin serves as a philosophical and moral counterpoint to Anna's story. He is a wealthy landowner who struggles with questions of faith, social justice, agricultural reform, and the meaning of life. His journey involves his pursuit of Kitty Shcherbatskaya, his marriage, and his eventual discovery of spiritual peace through family life, hard work, and a simple, Christian understanding of existence, representing an alternative path to happiness.

**What is the contrast between Anna's and Levin's narratives?**

Anna's narrative is a tragic descent driven by passionate, illicit love and societal condemnation, leading to isolation and despair. Levin's narrative is an ascent, a search for meaning through family, rural life, and spiritual awakening, culminating in a sense of peace and purpose. Their parallel stories explore different paths to happiness and the consequences of their choices within 19th-century Russian society, offering a comprehensive view of human existence.

**What are Levin's main struggles regarding faith and society?**

Levin grapples with profound existential questions, doubting traditional religious dogma while yearning for spiritual truth. He is critical of urban society's superficiality and the injustices faced by peasants, constantly seeking ways to improve their lives and his own estate. His struggle is to reconcile his intellectual skepticism with an innate desire for faith and to find a meaningful way to live in the world, ultimately finding peace in simple, practical Christianity.

**What is the significance of the epigraph 'Vengeance is mine; I will repay' from Romans 12:19?**

The epigraph sets a moral and theological framework for the novel. It suggests that judgment and retribution belong to God, not to humans. This theme is explored through the characters' attempts to impose their own moral judgments and punishments, particularly concerning Anna's affair, and the tragic consequences that unfold when individuals usurp divine authority, leading to suffering and destruction rather than justice.

**How does Anna's relationship with Vronsky evolve throughout the novel?**

Their relationship begins with intense passion and mutual adoration, but it gradually deteriorates under the weight of societal ostracism, Vronsky's lingering social obligations, and Anna's increasing jealousy, possessiveness, and paranoia. The initial bliss gives way to mutual resentment, misunderstanding, and a suffocating dependency, ultimately leading to their profound unhappiness and Anna's tragic end, demonstrating the destructive nature of love without societal acceptance.

**What does the novel suggest about the institution of marriage and family?**

The novel presents a multifaceted view of marriage. It critiques superficial, duty-bound marriages like Anna's first, and highlights the destructive power of illicit love. Conversely, it champions marriage based on mutual respect, love, and shared values, as exemplified by Levin and Kitty, portraying it as a foundation for personal growth, spiritual fulfillment, and societal stability, despite its inevitable challenges and complexities, offering a nuanced perspective on domestic life.

**Spoiler: Why does Anna Karenina ultimately commit suicide?**

Spoiler: Anna commits suicide due to overwhelming despair, isolation, and a profound sense of entrapment. Her affair with Vronsky led to her ostracization from society, the loss of her son, and a deteriorating relationship with Vronsky, fueled by her intense jealousy and paranoia. Feeling utterly alone, unloved, and seeing no escape from her suffering, she throws herself under a train, mirroring her initial encounter with Vronsky and the symbolic train accident.

**Spoiler: What is the ending for Konstantin Levin?**

Spoiler: Levin's story concludes with a spiritual awakening and a newfound sense of peace. After years of intellectual and existential struggle, he realizes that true meaning lies not in philosophical systems but in simple faith, love for his family (Kitty and their son), and honest work on his estate. He accepts that while he may never fully understand God, he can live a good and purposeful life by following the moral principles he instinctively believes in, finding contentment in his rural existence.

**How does Tolstoy portray 19th-century Russian society in 'Anna Karenina'?**

Tolstoy offers a panoramic and critical portrayal of 19th-century Russian aristocracy and rural life. He exposes the hypocrisy, superficiality, and rigid social conventions of high society, where appearances often trump morality. He also delves into the lives of the peasantry and

landowners, exploring issues of serfdom, agricultural reform, and the search for authentic living outside the corrupting influence of urban elites, providing a rich social commentary.

**What is the significance of the train motif in Anna Karenina?**

The train is a powerful and recurring motif. It symbolizes modernity, fate, and destructive passion. Anna and Vronsky first meet at a train station where a worker dies, foreshadowing Anna's own tragic end. The train represents the unstoppable force of their love and the societal judgment that crushes her, ultimately becoming the instrument of her suicide, signifying her complete destruction by the very forces that brought her and Vronsky together, a symbol of inescapable destiny.