



Anna Karenina: A Story of Untrue Love

Recently, with the 2012 movie adaptation of *Anna Karenina* having been released, there has been an increasing interest in Leo Tolstoy's classic Russian novel of doomed romance. On the surface, the book tells the story of Anna's tragic affair with Count Vronsky in the midst of a world where such conduct is socially condemned. Many modern critics laud it as an appraisal of hypocritical moral boundaries and a standard of male dominance in nineteenth-century Russian culture. Anna herself is envisioned as a sort of tragic hero who defies her circumstances to be true to herself and her love. In short, the doomed love in the story is widely seen as a positive thing.

However, a closer look at the text will show that the author went to great lengths to demonstrate how and why Anna and Vronsky's love is doomed. It is not exactly presented as inevitable. By examining Anna's character and how she gets to be where she is at the end of the story, Tolstoy expresses a deeper moral and spiritual point that is often overlooked today: that of the true nature of love and the dangers of its immoral facsimiles. From this perspective, it becomes evident that Anna, far from the romantic figure she is sometimes pictured to be, is actually an anti-hero.

A hint of this is given before the novel even opens, in the epigraph: "Vengeance is mine; I will repay." This phrase is taken from Deuteronomy 32:35, and in its context is part of a speech made by God in which He says He will punish the faithlessness of Israel. It is followed by the lines, "for the day of their calamity is at hand, and their doom comes swiftly." This indicates



Keira Knightley as Anna Karenina.

that the epigraph can only be referring to Anna; no one else in the book is so decidedly doomed as she. There is also no evidence to dismiss the epigraph as insignificant; at the time Tolstoy wrote *Anna Karenina*, he had just undergone a philosophical conversion and reconciliation with the Orthodox Church, which is described under the guise of Levin's character at the end of the novel. As short-lived as this reconciliation with the church was, it does imply that, at the time, Tolstoy would not have misquoted the Bible or used it to make a statement about the unfairness of a vengeful God. Therefore, he must have meant to say that Anna received her due. Yet to the modern reader, that seems a bit harsh. After all, is it so evil to be in love?

This brings about the question of whether Anna and Vronsky really represent true love, the kind of love worth a person's life. To determine that, it is necessary to look at the way their love story progresses. In the novel, Anna is given the choice between loyalty to her dry, conventional

husband and the dashing young officer Vronsky. Vronsky and Anna have only to meet once at a railway station and exchange very few words before they become entranced and obsessed with each other. After Vronsky throws over Anna's sister-in-law Kitty, who had been convinced of Vronsky's imminent proposal, Anna begs him, "If you love me as you say you do . . . behave so that I may be at peace", meaning to apologize to Kitty and leave her alone. Yet Vronsky will not give up, until Anna's "eyes [say] something very different". There is hardly another encounter between them before they are in the midst of an affair. To a mature adult, it is apparent already how ill-advised and hasty a decision this is.

Some might argue that this is simply showing a break away from rigid morality toward sexual freedom. Yet following the initial excitement of the affair, Tolstoy shows exactly how freeing this break makes the two lovers, particularly Anna; that is, it doesn't.

In the movie, the scene where Anna's

old friend Dolly, whom she had helped to reconcile to her unfaithful husband, comes to visit while Vronsky and Anna are living together, is very short and pointed. Anna sullenly asks if Dolly disapproves of her. Dolly, evidently thinking of her own faithless husband, answers tearfully, “No. I wish I’d done the same, but no one asked me. . . . Well, I wouldn’t have been brave enough.” The on-screen encounter only serves to highlight Anna’s nonconformist, daring decision.

In the book, however, this scene is pivotal and sends quite a different, subtler message. When Dolly goes to see Anna, Anna tells her at length about her secret misery; she feels judged and cut off from society, she has lost touch with all her old friends, and she fears Vronsky is losing his fascination for her. Dolly, far from expressing a wish to be in Anna’s position, only expresses pity and quietly observes in Anna’s frivolous new friends “the unnaturalness of grown-up people playing childish games in the absence of children”. This phrase is easily extended in the reader’s mind to symbolize the whole degenerate attitude of Vronsky’s crowd, so to speak, which now includes Anna. In short, a closer look at Anna’s break from moral constraint shows Dolly and the reader only how confined and unhappy she makes herself, with Vronsky’s romantic consolation rapidly fading.

Another point that is often brought up in the feminist interpretation of the book is the fact that Anna is not allowed to keep her son when she leaves her husband to be with Vronsky. As she herself says resentfully in the movie, “The laws are made by husbands and fathers.” Yet if one looks at the situation in reverse, and considers what would have happened if it had been the husband, Karenin, who left Anna, one would be shocked at the unfairness of Karenin taking their son with him. Therefore, to be com-

pletely fair regarding both sexes, it only makes sense that Karenin is the parent who retains custody over the boy.

As if to demonstrate the point further, Tolstoy makes another child appear: Anna and Vronsky’s daughter. Yet Anna finds that this child is somehow not as lovable as her other one; “for some reason she did not grip her heart”. The baby girl is said to not have received “a hundredth part of the care given to the first child”. Anna excuses this inequity by saying that her son is already an

loved by Anna. This is another significant detail that shows the nature of Anna’s love—it is self-centered and not concerned about giving to someone who cannot give back, even when that person is her daughter. It is small wonder at this point that Anna has set herself up to be unhappy.

Yet the most dramatic and distressing illumination of Anna’s character does not come until the book’s final scene of her life. In this scene, the unfortunate mistress looks around the world and is scandalized

to see other people laughing and happy. She tries to remember a time when she was genuinely happy and cannot, exclaiming in despair that it was “all lies, all deception, all evil!” She also says, “I don’t know myself. ‘I know my appetites,’ as the French say.” In other words, she has gotten to the point where she is so defined by her desires that she has lost touch with any other part of herself. Thus, when her desires are inadequately fulfilled, she despairs. What a timeless lesson, and one that again is not portrayed explicitly in the movie. It is on this note that the reader sees the last of Anna.

With all this in mind, it is fair enough to say that Anna is not a very admirable person, and certainly not one whom we should look to as a model for a relationship. Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* is not the story of an innocent victim of forces beyond her control. It is a warning about irresponsible love, which can be more properly called lust. The movie depicts this only to

a limited extent, while modern critics and popular characterization miss it entirely. As actress Keira Knightly says of the novel’s original portrayal of Anna, “There is a judgment in the piece of her actions, and it isn’t necessarily a positive one.”

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individual who understands and judges and loves her, while the baby girl is not old enough to be anything but “prospective”. In other words, Anna loves her son because of the emotional security she gets from his love which, ironically, knows nothing of her affair or why she left, and thus cannot really understand her. Anna’s daughter is too young to express any fondness for the affection-starved Anna, and thus she is not