

Introduction

'Possibly I have made a mistake,' Karenin added.

'No,' said Anna slowly, looking with despair into his cold face. 'You have not made a mistake. I am listening to you, but I am thinking of him. I love him and I am his mistress. I hate you, I am afraid of you . . . You can do what you like with me.'

Anna Karenina is young, beautiful and full of life. She is the jewel of Petersburg society and is admired by everybody. Her husband is a respected but dull government official who is much older than she is. Deep inside Anna there is a secret emptiness that not even she knows about. Her only real love is for her son, but is that enough to keep her happy?

One day, her brother calls her from Moscow. His marriage is in serious trouble and he urgently needs his sister's help to persuade his wife not to leave him. Anna, with her easy nature and gentle charms, soon achieves her aim but, while in Moscow, she meets a handsome young man called Vronsky. A fire is lit in the shadowy depths of her heart. Excited by the heat of passion, but eaten by its flames, Anna is desperately torn between her love for Vronsky and her love for her son. Unable to lie to the people around her, she tells her husband the truth, and one of the greatest love stories in world literature tragically unfolds.

Anna Karenina, by Count Leo Nikolayevich Tolstoy (1828–1910) has been called the greatest novel of all time. It covers an enormous range and depth of emotions – love, hate, despair, anger, pity, sorrow and joy – all set against the background of high society in late nineteenth-century Russia. The story took Tolstoy four years to write, from 1873 to 1877, and appeared part by part in a monthly magazine called the *Russian Messenger*.

However, the last part was not published in the magazine because the editor did not agree with the views expressed in the final scenes. The novel's first complete appearance, therefore, was in book form in 1878.

Tolstoy had first thought of calling his novel *Two Couples* or *Two Marriages*. Apart from the relationship between Anna and Vronsky, we also see the development of the relationship between Kitty and Levin, a quiet, shy, thoughtful man who prefers the peace and quiet of country life to the colourful but basically meaningless life of big city high society.

On one level, *Anna Karenina* can be read as a brilliantly-told story of tragic romance. In fact, many people criticized it when it was first published for exactly this reason. One writer called it, 'an unimportant romance of high life'. However, when we consider that Tolstoy himself (like Levin in the story), deeply disliked the extreme wealth and mindless behaviour of upper-class Russians at the time, we can also see the story at a deeper level: the difficulty of being truly honest when the rest of society only accepts falseness.

When Tolstoy first started *Anna Karenina*, he did not like his heroine very much, and did not even make her beautiful. But as the work progressed, his attitude towards her changed dramatically and he wrote of her with sympathetic admiration. The result is a complex character who is constantly at war with her own feelings. Anna can neither be completely honest nor completely false and it is this confusion which makes her, like Shakespeare's Hamlet, one of literature's most interesting creations.

Fyodor Dostoyevsky, the great Russian writer who wrote *Crime and Punishment*, was more accurate in his judgement on the book than most other commentators at the time. He described it as 'a perfect work of art'. Another important admirer of the book was the important twentieth-century Russian writer Vladimir Nabokov. He especially admired 'the perfect magic of

Tolstoy's style' and the way that Tolstoy used trains as a symbol of approaching tragedy throughout the book.

The story also, as we have seen, describes the very different kind of love story between Kitty and Levin. The joyous, honest and basically stable relationship between Levin and Kitty is in sharp contrast to the passionate but dark, unstable relationship between Anna and Vronsky. In the story, Levin represents Tolstoy himself. Tolstoy gives Levin the events of his own life and his own thoughts and ideas. The relationship between Levin and Kitty is mirrored in the relationship between Tolstoy and his wife, Sonya. Sonya used to joke to her husband about Levin, on one occasion saying, 'You are Levin plus talent, and Levin is an unbearable fellow!' Tolstoy, like Levin, found great comfort in his wife, with whom he lived very happily on his country estate, fathering thirteen children in fifteen years.

Tolstoy considered this book to be his first true novel. He did not consider his earlier book, *War and Peace* (1865–69) to be a real novel, because in it fiction was mixed with historical fact, and real people like Napoleon appeared. On 11 May 1873, he wrote to his friend Strakhov about his new work: 'I am writing a novel that has nothing to do with Peter the Great . . . This novel – I mean a novel, the first in my life – is very close to my heart, and I am completely wrapped up in it.'

Tolstoy had long had the idea for a novel about a beautiful society woman who has a relationship outside marriage. But a particular incident in 1872 caused him to write *Anna Karenina*. A young woman who had been rejected by her lover threw herself under a train at his local station. Tolstoy was deeply affected by seeing the body of this woman who, crazy with grief and jealousy, had given everything for love, even her life.

A short time later, in March 1873, Tolstoy picked up one of his children's books, a story by Pushkin, and read the first line aloud to Sonya, 'The guests arrived at the country house.' He turned to

his wife and said, 'That's the way to begin,' meaning that a novel should begin the middle of the action, without long descriptions. That evening he wrote the first lines of *Anna Karenina*.

Today, the story still captures our imagination, and several film and TV adaptations have been made of it. The most famous film of the story, perhaps, is the 1935 Hollywood version directed by Clarence Brown, with Greta Garbo as Anna. Interestingly, in this film the relationship between Anna and Vronsky is shown to be completely immoral and wrong, and there is no mention at all of their child. The character of Karenin, Anna's husband, is pictured in a very sympathetic light. Tolstoy would not have approved!

Leo Tolstoy was born on 28 August 1828, the fourth of five children. His father was Count Nicholas Ilch Tolstoy and his mother was Princess Nikolayevna Volkonsky. His mother died in 1830, after giving birth to her fifth child. She was a very creative person, and a great story-teller, who was passionately interested in the development of her children and wanted them to grow up into men of ability. Tolstoy studied law and eastern languages at Kazan University, but left without a degree, dissatisfied with the quality of education at the university. In 1851, with large debts as a result of heavy betting, he joined the army with his elder brother, Nikolai. He also began his literary career, publishing three books about his life: *Childhood* (1852), *Boyhood* (1854) and *Youth* (1857).

One of his earliest published stories, *The Raid* (1852), was based on a true military adventure that his brother took part in. Tolstoy was already beginning his life-long hatred of war. 'Can it be,' he wrote, 'that there is not room for all men on this beautiful earth?' Fifty years later, Tolstoy returned to this period in his life with the short novel *Hadji Murad* (1904), which is still an extremely useful introduction to the background of Russia's present-day problems with Chechnya.

During the Crimean War, Tolstoy was a field gun commander and witnessed the famous battle for the town of Sebastopol (1854–55). After travelling around Europe in 1857, he settled in Yasnaya Polyana, where he started a school for peasant children. Believing that the secret of changing the world lay in education, he published magazines and text books on the subject of educational theory. In 1862, he married Sonya Andreyevna Behrs (1844–1919).

Tolstoy's fiction developed originally out of his diaries, in which he tried to understand his own feelings and actions in order to control them. *War and Peace* reflects Tolstoy's view that everything that happens in life is governed by a great universal plan, but we cannot live unless we believe that we have freedom of will. This idea occurs again in his other great novel, *Anna Karenina*, in which Anna struggles to find freedom in passionate love, but is powerless to control the events that result from her actions and which eventually destroy her.

After *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy began to see himself more as a philosopher and a moral leader than an artist. In the 1880s, he wrote philosophical works such as *A Confession and What I Believe*. In 1884, he gave his estate to his family and tried to live as a wandering peasant. He wrote one more important novel, *Resurrection* (1899). He died in 1910 of a serious illness at a small railway station a long way from home. Eight years after his death, his wife was heard to say, 'I lived with Lev Nikolayevich for forty-eight years, but I never really learnt what kind of man he was.'

Tolstoy's ideas and teaching had a great influence on people in the twentieth century, including the Indian spiritual leader Gandhi. But his name will always be remembered as the writer of *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*.

Chapter 1 Affairs of the Heart

All happy families are alike, but an unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.

Everything had gone wrong in the Oblonsky household. The wife, Dolly, had found out that her husband had been having an affair with the children's French teacher, and had announced that she could not go on living in the same house. She did not leave her room, and her husband stayed away from home all day. Their five children wandered all over the house, not knowing what to do with themselves. The servants were quarrelling with each other, and the head cook had left.

On the third morning after the quarrel, Prince Stepan Oblonsky – Stiva, as he was generally called by his friends – awoke at his usual time of about eight o'clock. Suddenly he remembered why he was not in his usual bedroom but on a leather sofa in his study.

'Dolly will never forgive me – she cannot forgive me!' he thought. 'What have I done? It's all my fault! But I can't really be blamed. That's the whole tragedy.'

He remembered how he had come back from the theatre three nights ago, feeling very happy, and had found Dolly waiting for him in the bedroom with a note in her hand and an expression of horror, despair and anger on her face.

'What's this? What does it mean?' she had demanded coldly, holding out the note.

Oblonsky was so surprised that Dolly had discovered his affair that he had not known what to say. He had not tried to defend himself or to ask for forgiveness. He had only smiled his usual kind and rather foolish smile. Dolly had run from the room with a stream of angry and bitter words, and since then she had refused to see him.

‘Why did I smile in that silly way?’ thought Oblonsky. ‘And what can I do now?’ he asked himself again.

The affair with the French teacher was not the first affair that Oblonsky had had. He was not really sorry about it; he only regretted that he had not managed to hide things better from his wife. He was thirty-four years old, handsome and charming, but he was no longer in love with Dolly. She was a good wife and mother, but her youth and beauty had faded.

He rang the bell, and immediately a servant came in, carrying his boots, clothes and a telegram. Oblonsky tore open the telegram and read it, and his face brightened. It was from his sister, Anna, in Petersburg, where she lived with her husband and eight-year-old son. Dolly was very fond of Anna, and Oblonsky had written to her hoping that she might come and put things right between them. The telegram said Anna would be arriving in Moscow the next day.

When the servant had left the room, Oblonsky dressed with his usual care. Then he smoked a cigarette before crossing the room and opening the door into his wife’s bedroom.

Dolly was standing in front of a cupboard, trying to make a decision. Her own things and the children’s clothes lay everywhere on the floor. She was thinking that she ought to leave Oblonsky and take the children to her mother’s. But in her heart she knew this was impossible because, in spite of everything, Oblonsky was her husband and she still loved him.

When she saw her husband come in, she felt even more annoyed. He looked so fresh and healthy, as if nothing in the world was wrong. Dolly pretended not to notice him, trying to appear strong and determined but only succeeding in looking lost and miserable.

‘Anna is coming tomorrow,’ said Oblonsky in a soft voice.

‘Well, I can’t receive her,’ cried Dolly. ‘I’m leaving you and going to my mother’s.’

‘Dolly, you must try and understand, you must see . . .’

‘Go away, go away, go away!’ Dolly cried without looking at him, as if the cry was torn from her body.

When Oblonsky saw Dolly’s suffering face and heard the terrible despair in her voice, his eyes filled with tears.

‘Dolly, please forgive me! Please think of the children – they’ve done nothing wrong. I’m the guilty one. Punish me for my sin! Tell me what to do – but, please, Dolly, forgive me!’

Dolly sat down and said, ‘*I am* thinking of the children, Stiva, and I would do anything in the world for them. But I don’t know what is best for them – whether I should take them away or leave them with a father who is immoral. How can we live together after what’s happened? I hate you! You never loved me!’ She rose quickly and moved towards the door.

‘Dolly, one more word,’ said Oblonsky, going after her.

‘Go away!’ she screamed. She went out, banging the door.

Oblonsky called his servant and told him to prepare a room for Anna. Then he put on his coat and went to his office.

Oblonsky had a well-paid position as head of one of Moscow’s courthouses. He needed a job with a good salary because he always had a lot of debts. He had obtained this job through his sister Anna’s husband, Alexei Karenin, who had an important position in the ministry to which the courthouse was attached.

Oblonsky was not hard-working, but he was clever, good-natured, charming and popular. People were always delighted to see him because he made them feel happy. ‘Ah! Stiva! Oblonsky!’ they would say with a smile of pleasure.

On arrival at the courthouse, Oblonsky went straight into a meeting to discuss a report. It was nearly two o’clock when the meeting finished. When he came out, he saw a man running quickly and lightly up the stairs towards him. He was strongly built and broad-shouldered with black hair and a curly beard. Oblonsky smiled with surprise and pleasure.

‘Levin! It’s you! What are you doing in Moscow?’

Levin and Oblonsky were the same age and had been good

friends since their schooldays. Although they were very fond of one another, they were very different in their characters and tastes. Oblonsky enjoyed the good restaurants and theatres and expensive clothes of Moscow. But town life made Levin feel uncomfortable. He had a large estate and farm in the country, and was only happy when he was living and working there.

‘I’m so very glad to see you,’ cried Oblonsky, noticing with surprise that Levin was wearing a smart new French suit.

‘I must talk to you about something,’ said Levin. Suddenly he seemed shy and embarrassed. ‘Tell me, what are the Shcherbatskys doing? The same as usual?’

Oblonsky was not at all surprised by Levin’s question. He had known for some time that Levin was in love with Princess Kitty Shcherbatskaya, Dolly’s younger sister. He smiled.

‘If you want to see the Shcherbatskys,’ he said, ‘they are sure to be in the Skating Gardens from four to five. Kitty skates there. You go, and I’ll call for you and we’ll have dinner together.’

‘Excellent!’ said Levin.

At four o’clock that afternoon, Levin went to the Skating Gardens and, with a beating heart, turned along the path to the ice-hills and the skating-ground. He was sure that Kitty would be there as he had seen the Shcherbatskys’ carriage at the entrance. It was a bright frosty afternoon, and the ice was crowded with people, young and old, experts and beginners.

Levin recognized Kitty at once among the skaters. He knew she was there by the joy and terror that seized his heart.

Kitty saw him too. She skated up to him, smiling her wonderful smile as she gave him her hand.

‘Have you been in Moscow long?’ she asked.

‘Not long. I came yesterday... I mean today,’ said Levin in confusion. ‘I didn’t know you could skate so well.’

‘Why don’t you get some skates and we can skate together?’ suggested Kitty.