

# Reading Club Guide

## INTRODUCTION

A handful of novels—such as Dickens's *Bleak House* or Joyce's *Ulysses*—cause us to feel upon closing them that the world we are returning to is somehow smaller than the one we have just left. *Anna Karenina* belongs to this group. One measure of its breadth is the enormous range of life experience Tolstoy depicts. Another measure is its attention to so many contemporary issues of nineteenth-century Russia. These immediately apparent features account for the length of *Anna Karenina*, but a more subtle feature gives the novel its capacious quality. Because it is so rich in incident, and because the psychologies of its main characters are so nuanced as to endow each with a fully formed view of the world, all that happens in *Anna Karenina* happens, in a sense, without adequate explanation, as in real life. When he is about to confront Anna about her relationship with Vronsky, Alexei Alexandrovich hesitates, feeling that he stands "face to face with something illogical and senseless," with "life [itself]" (p. 142). If the novel strikes us similarly, it is not because Tolstoy does not suggest or even state causes for the novel's events. Rather, the causes do not constitute an explanation, and the ultimately incompatible perspectives of the characters only intensify the mysteries with which the novel leaves us.

The first sentence of *Anna Karenina* is one of the best-known openings of any novel: "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." Such a pronouncement, with the appearance of thoughtfully dispensed wisdom, holds the promise of a narrator who will illuminate all that follows. But this statement can be more accurately described as an observation, rather than an explanation or an interpretation. As the novel progresses, this distinction becomes increasingly evident. When contemplating his unhappiness, Vronsky thinks that he has erred in his belief that the realization of his desires would make him happy. Tolstoy does not tell us what would make Vronsky or anyone else happy, and the absence is both conspicuous and emblematic of the way Tolstoy frames issues without directing us to a specific understanding of them. He tells us how Vronsky arrives at this thought, but, as to the question of what happiness is, we get nothing but vague implication.

The question of happiness, however, is clearly central to the novel. One may suppose that the portrayal of varying degrees of happiness informs Tolstoy's decision to structure the novel so that Anna and Vronsky's relationship and Levin and Kitty's marriage run parallel to one another. But words like *happy* and *unhappy* lose their descriptive power when we consider that "happy in his family life, a healthy man, Levin was several times so close to suicide that he hid a rope lest he hang himself with it, and was afraid to go about with a rifle lest he shoot himself" (p. 789). The spiritual crisis that pushes Levin to this point seems far removed from all that Anna faces. Her extreme isolation from everyone except Vronsky—whom she fears she is on the brink of losing—helps propel her toward suicide. The fact that Levin finally arrives at a formulation of the meaning of his life that he finds acceptable keeps him from sharing Anna's fate, yet he chooses to keep this revelation a secret from Kitty. Does this gesture indicate a kind of solitude from which Levin and Anna both suffer?

More than anything else in *Anna Karenina*, Anna's suicide casts a shadow over the entire novel because it both invites and ultimately escapes interpretation. To the society that scorns her for her affair, her death is due punishment. Anna's plea for forgiveness "for everything" just before she dies suggests her own sense of guilt—though it does not adhere to some specific act—and perhaps a belief that justice is at hand. Yet a moment earlier "she was horrified at what she was doing" (p. 768). Does she understand what brings her to this end? The temptation to consider it any sort of commentary on

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adultery is complicated by Stiva and Dolly. Adultery seems almost becoming to Stiva, and he engages in it with impunity. Dolly tolerates Stiva's wandering without approving of it, yet she sympathizes with Anna, even imagining the pleasure she would take from a similar affair. If Levin is the novel's moral center, he nevertheless fails to tip the balance toward any single interpretation of Anna's fate. He not only allows Anna her mysteriousness; it even seems to overwhelm his capacity for judgment.

### ABOUT LEO TOLSTOY

Leo Tolstoy was born in 1828 on his aristocratic family's estate south of Moscow. A young life of what he called "vulgar licentiousness" included studying for a degree he did not complete, traveling in Europe, and serving in the military. While fighting in the Crimean War in the 1850s, he wrote short stories that established his literary reputation. Tolstoy inherited his family's estate, Yasnaya Polyana, along with 700 serfs, and settled there. In addition to his writing, Tolstoy immersed himself in the work of social reform, establishing a school for his serfs and trying to bring about the emancipation of all serfs.



Tolstoy married Sofya Andreyevna Behrs in 1862, beginning a long period of contentment; they had thirteen children. While managing his estate and educational projects, Tolstoy wrote his two greatest novels, *War and Peace* (1869) and *Anna Karenina* (1877). In the late 1870s, he suffered a deep spiritual crisis and renounced his former beliefs and literary works. He embraced a rational Christianity that stressed humility, universal brotherhood, and the abandonment of private property. He tried to commit himself to chastity and vegetarianism.

*A Confession* (1882) described this change in Tolstoy's life and writing. Increasingly troubled by the disparities between the life with his family and the beliefs he espoused, Tolstoy secretly left home in 1910, hoping to find a peaceful refuge. He died several days later at a remote railway station.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How are we to understand the epigram "Vengeance is mine, I will repay"? Should Anna's fate be considered the result of God's vengeance? Is Anna's desire to take vengeance on Vronsky being condemned?
2. When Vronsky first meets Anna, "it was as if a surplus of something so overflowed her being that it expressed itself beyond her will..." (p. 61). What is this something? Why is it expressed beyond her will?
3. Why is Anna able to reconcile Stiva and Dolly?
4. We are told that it is unpleasant for Anna to read about other people's lives because she "wanted too much to live herself" (p. 100). Why are reading and living placed in opposition to one another?

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5. When Anna and Vronsky have satisfied their desire for one another, why does Tolstoy compare Vronsky to a murderer?
6. After telling her husband about her affair, why does Anna feel that "everything was beginning to go double in her soul" (p. 288)?
7. Why does Tolstoy counterpose Levin and Kitty's marriage with Anna and Vronsky's relationship?
8. Why does Levin continually imagine his future in such detail, only to have his actual experience differ from what he had expected?
9. What keeps Dolly from having an affair like Anna's, even though she imagines one "parallel to it, an almost identical love affair of her own" (p. 609)?
10. While explaining her affair to Dolly, Anna says, "I simply want to live; to cause no evil to anyone but myself" (p. 616). Does the novel present these two objectives as compatible or incompatible?
11. Why, as she later admits to herself, did Anna want Levin to fall in love with her when she met him?
12. Why does Anna kill herself? Why does everyone and everything seem so ugly to Anna just before she does so?
13. Is it Anna herself or the society in which she lives that is more responsible for her unhappiness?
14. Why are the consequences of Stiva's adultery so insignificant relative to those Anna faces?
15. Why does Vronsky go to war as a volunteer after Anna's suicide?
16. Of all the novel's characters, why is it only Anna and Levin who contemplate suicide?
17. Why does Levin believe that he must keep the revelation in which he comes to understand faith a secret from Kitty?
18. Why does Tolstoy end the novel with Levin's musings about the nature of faith and his embrace of morally justifiable actions as the basis for the meaning of life?

### For Further Reflection

1. What should we take into account when trying to balance responsibility to ourselves with responsibility to others?

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2. To what extent does a society determine which of our individual desires can be satisfied?

### **Related Titles**

Kate Chopin, *The Awakening* (1899)

Once Edna Pontellier discovers within herself the desires suppressed by marriage and motherhood, the world that so tightly restricts her freedom proves un