

Tolstoy's anna karenina: plot overview

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Tolstoy's Anna Karenina is a multifaceted novel, which uses complex symbols those run parallel to the main plot and adds as a concentration of the whole storyline. The Steeplechase has got critical researches for its multipurpose approach to the psychology of Tolstoy's theme. The Steeplechase: a public event that sets the climax of the early part of Anna Karenina. T. G. S. Cain asserts that Tolstoy's depiction of this horse race is both "the most obvious and the most controversial of the symbolic episodes" of the novel. Edward Wasiolek remarks that the passage "begs to be dismantled". Through this Tolstoy brings about vast changes in the fortunes and mind-set of three major characters: Vronsky, Anna, and Karenin. This scene is so amenable to different interpretations that the spectrum of informed opinion is broad too. Barbara Hardy refutes such speculation about the race. She observes "the mare does not stand for Anna or Vronsky's mistake for his failure in love". Dmitry Merezhkovsky asks whether Vronsky did not "destroy Anna in a cruel game," just as he killed his priced mare Frou-Frou. R. P. Blackmur considers Vronsky's attitude toward both the horse and Anna as "reckless pastime". On a figurative approach, Frou-Frou is clearly a symbol of Anna, or Vronsky's relationship with her, as the horse appears in the novel soon after Vronsky's illicit love affair with Anna becomes serious and dangerous for their social reputation both of which are ultimately destroyed. The implications of the steeplechase episode remain prominent from the beginning to the end of the novel. Tolstoy also suggests through the symbol of the horse that upon the occasion of Anna's first sexual infidelity with Vronsky, she sustains a kind of metaphorical broken back that is analogous to the broken back of the mare in the race.

This symbolic horse image implies much about the power dynamics between Anna and Vronsky. On the surface level, the gripping description of a horse race in an aristocratic Russian setting is a realistic tour de force. The author also demonstrates Vronsky's central deficiency from which all other inadequacies flow: his awkwardness or inability to keep pace and prefigures Anna's tragic death. Tolstoy portrays that ideal love beyond marriage is a race. Anna didn't perish right after her "broken back", but limps through the rest of the novel until the psychological burden of adultery finally compels to kill her. The name Frou-Frou came from a popular French play by Henry Meilhac and Ludovic Halevy titled by the same name, in which the heroine Frou-Frou, abandons her husband and son for a lover. Significantly, a more particular analogy is both the horse and Anna are feverish and trembling uncontrollably before the race. Moreover, Vronsky straightens "a lock of mane that had got on the wrong side of her sharply-defined withers, a lock reminiscent of Anna's "wilful ringlets". Later, Vronsky breaks his mount's back; the horse struggled like "a wounded fluttering bird". Meanwhile in the stands, Anna also "began to flutter like a captive bird". The event of steeplechase also places a psychological stringency on the two male characters. Karenin never recovers entirely from his wife's open confession of her love for Vronsky and her hatred for him, which comes just after the race when Vronsky is injured. For Vronsky, he knew for the first time "the cruellest, most bitter memory of his life". Therefore the death of the mare is also a kind of symbolic death for the three main characters, none of whom ever recovers completely after this incident. It is of great interest to evaluate that a dead horse becomes a prominent symbol, for adultery, which is a kind

of a murder-suicide. Anna's passion is rapturous and exalted but also fatal. Illicit sex for Anna makes the author reveal that at this juncture human loose contact with god just as in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*.

The association between Karenin and the horse Gladiator is to be examined in the light of the scene where Anna arrives in Petersburg following her reconciliation of Dolly with Stiva. Her first thought on catching sight of Karenin is "what happened to his ears?" They pressed "against the rim of his hat" and were "gristly". Vronsky observes Karenin's "slightly rounded back", "the swinging of his thighs", each of these features links Karenin to Gladiator. Vronsky on his way to Frou-Frou sees Gladiator "with his ears looking enormous". Vronsky is offended by Gladiator's "wonderful hindquarters", for he appears to sense Gladiator as his rival Karenin. But, why Karenin is attested with another horse symbol? Vronsky just before the race came to know about Anna's pregnancy with his child and according to Vronsky's code as an officer of the Imperial Guard, an offended husband has the right to demand a duel. Feeling duplicitous Vronsky races Gladiator, one who duels and at least metaphorically battles his enemy, Karenin. Thus Karenin runs in the steeplechase as Gladiator, as well as throughout the novel in a perilous race against Anna's lover.

It is reasonable to imagine that Anna, Karenin, and Serezha are the subconscious human referents for the horses in the contest: Frou-Frou, Gladiator (the powerful duelist) and Makhotin (the small but distressing impediment). By implications, to the steeplechase, the race can truly be called the novel's central allegorical image. Infidelities of high society

reverberate throughout this novel. The six themes seen clearly in the steppelchase are:

1. Initially, Anna is hesitant about whether to submit to Vronsky; he is not in control of the situation.
2. Vronsky and Anna soon achieve relatively easy success; Vronsky establishes more control.
3. They surmount a serious societal obstacle, although a presage of danger accompanies this success.
4. They surmount a serious obstacle from her family, but the family continues to “pursue” them.
5. They conquer a serious obstacle within their relationship, but a hint of mutual lack of confidence and a threat of violence accompanies this success.
6. They fail to surmount a relatively minor obstacle; Anna perishes and Vronsky again loses control.