

Analyze the anna karenina essay

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Marital infidelity is condemned by law, religion and society in almost any country, more so in late 19th century Russia. In our modern culture as well, the unfaithful woman gets greater censure than the man who is guilty of it. This is also the case in Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. Oblonsky (Stiva) cheats on his wife, not once but twice, but he gets no more than a gentle reprimand. Anna Karenina, on the other hand, earns severe contempt from society for her adulterous liaison with the dashing Count Vronsky.

On the surface, Tolstoy himself must have realized the gravity of her crime and to appease the moralists of his day he had to make her pay for it: she committed suicide, crushed beneath an oncoming train. But an in-depth comparison of Stiva's and Anna's infidelities, seen in the light of Tolstoyan thought, would suggest the author did not intend to condemn Anna's deed alone, but the entire society of his day for its hypocrisy, its double standard of morality.

Discussing the inequality of rights in marriage between men and women, Pestov acknowledged that "the inequality in marriage...lay in the fact that the infidelity of the wife and the infidelity of the husband are punished unequally, both by the law and by public opinion." (4. 12). Conservative Russia and even contemporary society would tend to look at Stiva with greater understanding and even approval. This emerges after a brief comparison between him and Anna vis-a-vis their adulterous affairs. Oblonsky (Stiva) intended to keep his infidelities a secret; Dolly found out about his affair with the French governess only by his carelessness.

In contrast, Anna flirted openly with Vronsky despite knowing Kitty was in love with him and was waiting for his proposal. While it was not her fault that Vronsky followed her in the train, letting other people into the budding romance, she could have observed some degree of decorum or discretion in his affair with the handsome officer, but she did not. The mere fact that Anna and Vronsky remained talking to each other at the little table even in the presence of her husband, at the beginning of their romance, was considered by the circle of guests present “ indecorous. (2. 7). Seemingly unable to comprehend, like Vronsky, the gravity of their crime, she opted to ignore the judgment of society, including the elite of St. Petersburg where “ everyone knows everyone else, everyone even visits everyone else” as well as of Moscow who frowned on such dalliances in contravention of the established morals of the day. (2. 4). Karenin became furious only when, against his insistence that she at least observe propriety and decorum, she allowed her lover to visit her at their home (2. 22).

Alexey, Anna’s husband, is depicted as the suffering party. He is pictured as one who is without vices and all virtue, although Anna hates him for it. He refuses to be jealous when his wife is besieged with other men. Giving her all the benefit of the doubt during their marriage, and before the affair, Alexey believed a gentleman was not supposed to go down in fits of jealousy, in reference to a woman’s exposure to temptations from other men, since he “ could never lower her and himself by jealousy. ” (1. 6).

Despite his initial hatred at Anna for leaving him and her son, he readily forgave her when he thought she was about to die (4. 17). Then as now,

people dismissed a man's extramarital affairs in consideration of his virile nature. Oblonsky thought he could not be faulted for fooling around as he was still young and good-looking, while his wife was already past her prime. He was prone to temptation, and therefore could not be easily faulted for succumbing to earthly temptations. He thought his trysts with other women were but innocent, harmless pursuits.

In contrast, Anna is severely judged for breaking her marital vows. It ignores as of no moment that fact that she married a man she did not love, who was twenty years older and made her life inexplicably miserable. She is condemned because of the perception that she had no excuse for wanting the affections of another, no matter how infatuated she may be. She openly flirted with Vronsky, knowing Kitty was in love with him and awaiting his proposal. To the moral guardians of her day, Anna Karenina was irresponsible, being unable to realize the consequences of her actions.

Oblonsky remains his cheerful, confident self despite his marital troubles, even committing another infidelity with a pretty dancing girl despite his earlier avowal of regret, while Anna is physically and mentally devastated on account of her affair with Vronsky. Stiva considered his flings a mere pastime to escape the ennui of his everyday life, never seriously giving them much thought. To him, one "can be fond of new rolls when one has had one's rations of bread." He tells Levin, who is unconvinced, it really "does so little harm to anyone, and gives oneself so much pleasure." He said he did not "count life as life without love. (2. 14). In his mind, Stiva did not rue the fact that he was no longer in love with his wife; his only regret, believing she was

secretly aware of his dalliances but shut her eyes to them, was not being able to hide it from her. He was the type who relished his pleasures. He thought: " There's something common, vulgar, in flirting with one's governess. But what a governess! " (1. 2). For Stiva, as with many other men (or even society in general), a sin is not to be ashamed of as long as you maintain a sense of decorum or do it discreetly, careful about the sensibilities of other people who might be offended.

Men are even expected to engage in such pursuits, provided they do not compromise their honor or make a fool of themselves before others. Such was the reaction of Vronsky's mother, the countess, who thought that nothing " gave such a finishing touch to a brilliant man as a liaison in the highest society. " (2. 18). She was also pleased it was Anna Karenina who was involved with her son. To her, the matter became vexing only when she realized that their passion might lead him " into imprudence" and displease certain connections in high society. Vronsky's brother shared the sentiment of the countess:

He did not distinguish what sort of love his (Vronsky's) might be...(he kept a ballet girl himself, though he was the father of a family, so he was lenient in these matters), but he knew that this love affair was viewed with displeasure by those whom it was necessary to please, and therefore he did not approve of his brother's conduct. (2. 18). Of judgment by society, distinction should be made. There is a circle composed of the fashionable world, to which Anna was attached, that rendered no harsh judgment of her. Vronsky was conscious of the fact that he ran no risk of being ridiculous in the eyes of

Betsy or any other fashionable people. He was very well aware that in their eyes the position of an unsuccessful lover...might be ridiculous. But the position of a man pursuing a married woman, regardless of everything, staking his life on drawing her into adultery, has something fine and grand about it, and can never be ridiculous..." (4. 4.). (?) There was, however, another circle, composed of " elderly, ugly, benevolent, and godly women", known as the " conscience of Petersburg Society" at the center of which was the Countess Lidia Ivanovna.

Unlike the first circle which delighted in scandals and sympathized with the lovers, this particular group saw nothing but the immorality of Anna's affair with the count. The first circle tended to condone the lovers, seeing in them reflected their own human weaknesses. The second circle condemned it, finding the scandal loathsome in the eyes of man and God. Unlike his brother Stiva, Anna totally turned her back on her family to make a new life for herself, not in pursuit of temporary pleasure or thrill as Stiva is wont to do, but in obedience to the dictates of her heart, utterly disregarding convention.

Both Anna and her brother found it difficult to fathom the depth of their sins. Stiva believed himself quite powerless in the face of a woman " who loves him but who seeks nothing in return. " (1. 2). But whereas Stiva could not repent of his sins because they gave him so much pleasure, Anna and Vronsky cared not at all on how they shall be judged by society because of their total devotion for each other, finding that " the passion that united

them was so intense that they were both oblivious of everything else but their love. "(2. 21).

People might be gentler to Oblonsky because he immediately sought forgiveness from his wife when she discovered the affair; it did not once occur to him to forsake his family. As Anna points out to Dolly, men who commit such mistakes consider their families sacred. They may commit indiscretions but they would never seriously consider abandoning their home. " Somehow or other these women are still looked on with contempt by them, and do not touch on their feeling for their family," observed Anna, unaware that she too would be judged severely in her future affair. They draw a sort of line that can't be crossed between them and their families. " (1. 4). On the other hand, Anna left her husband to live with Vronsky without the formalities of divorce, earning the bitter ire of society and the church. By tradition, Anna's infidelity to his husband Karenin is deemed more contemptuous in view of the attendant biases, tenets, prejudices and beliefs surrounding their milieu. Infidelity marked the woman as guilty of a capital crime. Vronsky's mother judged her " a bad woman," concluding that her desperate passions were all " to show herself something out of the way.

The countess condemns her for completely ruining the life of his son and her husband, that " her very death was the death of a vile woman, of no religious feeling. "(8. 4). Then, a man's pride was considered above all considerations, and an offended spouse was expected to challenge to a duel the man who stained his honor. On the other hand, the unfaithful husband receives only a mild censure. After all, society is not disturbed by his dalliances, so long as

these are kept discreet and he does not abandon or neglect his own family. The unwritten dictum of the day, as now, was: Do what you have to do, but be discreet about it.

We find that there is very little distinction between the adulteries of Stiva and Anna Karenina. Anna's crime is deemed, at first blush, more reproachable, but we tend to understand her actuations, her emotions, upon deeper inquiry into her life. A young charming woman, married to an older man whom she detested for his virtues, is fair game to a dashing suitor. Never having been in love, she can not be faulted that easily considering her passionate nature, to fall madly in love while forgetting its possible repercussions. Such was the enormity of their love that they heeded not the probing and accusing eyes of society, religion, and the law.

At least, the offenders committed everything in the name of their love for each other, and this at least, to my view, mitigates their crime. Of Stiva's dalliances he has no saving grace. Oblonsky engages in it purely for the pleasure it brings, not because he is forced by the strength of his emotions. He has the temerity to seek forgiveness when his sole regret was not at hurting his wife but in having been so careless that his letter to his mistress was found. He even used Dolly's own money to pay off his debts. Tolstoy depicts the suffering of the man wronged, but he also pictures the offender in a sympathetic light.

Vronsky, for all his faults, undergoes suffering because of his forbidden love for Anna; he shoots himself in an attempted suicide. He speaks to no one for six months after Anna's death, and refuses to eat unless forced to. He

volunteers to serve in war, expecting never to return. (8. 4). Stiva looks upon him as a hero and an old friend. (8. 2). In *War and Peace*, Tolstoy tells of the suffering of Pierre Bezukhov on account of his wife's adulterous affair with Dolokhov, whom Pierre challenges and wounds in a duel. Tolstoy then depicts Dolokhov, despite his flaw, as "the most affectionate of sons and brothers. (4. 5). We condemn the woman, but isn't the man who seduces the wife of another, by the very definition of law and the Commandments, also an adulterer? The protagonists in Tolstoy's novels are handsome and dashing counts, princes, and nobles, the unfaithful wives charming and beautiful countesses and women of stature in society, not ungainly rogues and common women. He makes Anna Karenina a most charming, pretty, intelligent, educated woman. That she could have fallen low in the eyes of society makes one wonder, for it is commonly believed only ordinary mortals are susceptible to moral corruption.

Other than his pre-occupation with the upper class, to which he himself belonged, perhaps Tolstoy was driving home a message: infidelity is not confined to class or breeding; all human beings are vulnerable to human frailty and error. By focusing on the infidelities of Stiva and Anna, contrasting them with each other, Tolstoy could have been presenting to us his view of the elite of Russian society and their morals, depicted in all their hypocrisy and nakedness despite the glamour and elegance of St.

Petersburg and the other cosmopolitan cities where they lived. When we consider the infidelity of Anna Karenina and Count Vronsky against the unfolding of their mutual affection, we come to slowly understand that it

would appear to have been foreordained, aided by their temperament and character, their passion and yearning for life, other than a predisposition to commit evil. Vronsky perceives that his affair with Anna had drawn so much condemnation from society because they could not understand it.

Vronsky believed that if it were some common affair, people would have cared less. But society became annoyed because it could not comprehend his immense love for her, that the woman is “ dearer to [him] than life. ” (2. 21). While the young men envied him, “ the greater number of the young women, who envied Anna and had long been weary of hearing her called virtuous, rejoiced at the fulfillment of their predictions, and were only waiting for a turn in public opinion to fall upon her with all the weight of their scorn. ” (2. 18).

Despite her failings, Anna refuses to run away with Vronsky as she did not want to part from her son, terrified of his future attitude when he shall realize his mother had abandoned his father for another man (2. 23). Again, this softens our attitude towards Anna in the same way perhaps, that Dolly warms up to her upon sensing that she, too, has her own weaknesses. Stiva, on the other hand, appears outwardly kind and genial and considerate to all persons, but his remorseless cheating ought to be condemned the greater, if we are to judge him by the severity with which we judge Anna Karenina.

A person who repents does not necessarily have to wear sackcloth and ashes, but he should at least resolve to cease completely from doing that which hurt others. If he insists that he is incapable of repentance, why should he not be guilty of society's condemnation? Anna Karenina, in this regard,

would appear to be an indictment of society as a whole, showing the hypocrisy of those who find mirth and satisfaction in every scandal, assured that they are not lacking in company.

It reveals a community of educated, fashionable, religious, noble persons who cannot stand the unfaithfulness of a woman completely immersed in his love while ignoring the acts of a man who makes adultery nothing but a pleasurable game. Perhaps Tolstoy was asking us not to judge, for by judging others, as Jesus warned, we shall likewise be judged.