

Faminism in anna karenina

[Literature](#), [Books](#)



In the closing chapters of Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (Penguin Books, 2003), Dolly, Anna's sister-in-law, reveals that "Whatever way one lives, there's a penalty." This is the central message in Tolstoy's work, a tragedy whose themes include aristocracy, faith, hypocrisy, love, marriage, family, infidelity, greed, and every other issue prevalent among human beings. Anna Karenina is a tragic figure, but she can also be considered a feminist one. Her experiences resonate with female readers because she does the unexpected: she moves against the grain.

And with any woman—at least in literature—who accomplishes the unexpected, the inappropriate, she pays the price for it. A Princess, an aristocrat married to Count Alexei Karenin, an important man twenty years her senior, Anna Karenina is a socialite, a respected woman, a wife, and a mother. It seems as if she has it all, until she meets the handsome and charming young Count Alexei Vronsky. He stirs things in her—physical and emotional—that she has never experienced. This lack of experience in the spaces of love and desire is common—historically—for women.

They married who they were told to marry—for money, for titles, and for security. Not for love. Anna Karenina is not in love with her husband. She tolerates him, but secretly she feels repulsed by this rigid, domineering, and paternal man twice her age. Vronsky's wooing of her endangers her place in society, her marriage, and even her role as mother. When she succumbs to an affair with him, she does so with open eyes, aware of all that she is sacrificing for the sake of love.

And this isn't the tragedy of the novel, of the situation. The tragedy is that she is a woman in a man's world: "It was fate; she was doomed" from the <https://assignbuster.com/feminism-in-anna-karenina/>

start. And she was doomed because she was a woman acting out on her desires. Paralleled to her brother, Stiva, and his insuppressible and known womanizing, the novel demonstrates the evident attitudes society had at this time toward men and women acting in similar fashion. Men, the public faces of society, had the power, the voice, and the volition to act in any way they wished.

Stiva's womanizing is something his wife, Dolly, has to suffer silently. She has no power to stop it. She is merely the wife. She goes about her business taking care of the home and her children, knowing that gossip and shame shadow her footsteps. Although infidelity is looked upon as an act of dishonor, society looks the other way when men succumb to its powers. Men continue to keep their marriages, the power in the home—over their wives and children, their jobs, and their place in society goes unvarnished.

Even Vronsky, who openly seeks the affections of Anna, a married woman, a mother, and has an affair with her, has eyes rolled at him, but his career is never placed in danger. He does not lose his place in society, his options, his money, or his power. He loves, he takes what he wants, and then when he is done—when Anna becomes too obsessive, too cumbersome an affair—he simply walks away. In the end, he's lost nothing. He gave up nothing. With women, following their hearts is not so acceptable. It's a tragedy, as we come to see with Anna.

In following her heart, her passions, Anna loses her marriage, which is controlled by Karenin, who kicks her out of their home, but refuses to give her a divorce. In this way, she cannot marry Vronsky. She is forced to become his mistress and live with him in disgrace. When she takes her love out into

the public, she is shunned by the same people who once loved her, while everyone shakes Vronsky's hands. And the most valuable asset that she loses is access to her son, who is told that she is dead. Having lost everything and everyone, the only thing that remains is Vronsky.

And she grabs on to him with great force, with desperation, pushing him farther and farther away from her with every aching need she can muster. But he grows tired of her love and confesses to her that "A man needs his career," for he still has that fall back on. She has nothing. In losing him, she loses everything, and it is no wonder that she commits suicide. A woman in her day, having lost her place in society, her role as mother and wife, she cannot sustain herself. She gave everything up for love, for passion, for herself, to feed her own desires, but no one gave anything up for her.

She dies tragically, while everyone around her continues to move on without her. Today, we can look at a character like Anna Karenina and come face-to-face with a feminist: she is strong, determined, bold, and she fights the patriarchal powers that tell her she cannot have what men are allowed, no matter their place in society. And even though her attempts come crashing around her in the end, resulting in her violent suicide, she had the courage to act against the norm. This is empowerment. This is a feminist.