

Tolstoy's ideal woman in anna karenina



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

"All happy families are alike. Every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." (1. 1. 1)

In this famed first sentence of *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy alludes to the two kinds of familial happiness, almost comically simplifying the idea of 'family'. However, this formula cannot be tested because the families in *Anna Karenina* are not happy families, and the reader is treated to people nearly broken by adultery and scandal. Tolstoy presents the Oblonskys' plight as lighter because the adulterer is male, suggesting that the success of a family depends on the wife's immobility, not the husband's. Though Stiva, Vronsky, and Karenin divide their time between their home and their amusements, women (like Dolly) must make home the focal point of their lives. However, Tolstoy emphasizes Anna Karenina's animation when he introduces her in Chapter 18, and links her constant motion to her sexuality and independence outside the home. Tracing Tolstoy's descriptions of Dolly Oblonsky and Anna Karenina throughout the novel reveals Tolstoy's 'ideal' woman: one who unconditionally accepts both the pleasant and unpleasant aspects of her role as a mother and wife.

Anna Karenina begins with infidelity. Stepan Oblonsky enters his home to find, "his Dolly, forever fussing and worrying over household details...sitting perfectly still...looking at him with an expression of horror..." (1. 1. 3) Stiva's wife is only mobile within the household and is fulfilled by 'female' occupations; only when he finds her sitting still does he know that something is wrong. Throughout *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy is unforgiving in his description of Dolly's mannerisms and appearance, describing her as "worn out, already growing elderly, no longer pretty, and in no way remarkable, in fact, quite an

ordinary woman." (1. 1. 6) Her physical appearance, her piety, and her inability to satiate her husband's sexual desires define the sad life that Dolly lives. Tolstoy, while being sympathetic to Dolly's plight, seems to approve of it. Her devotion to her children makes her an effective wife and mother, but her age and appearance hinder her from the happiness she seeks. Though heartbroken, Dolly says " I can't leave [Stiva]: there are the children, and I am bound." (1. 19. 67). Dolly is rendered immobile by her duties to her family and her home but, despite Stiva's infidelity, Dolly quickly forgives her husband and returns to her domestic responsibilities. Tolstoy uses Dolly as a foil for Anna: in many ways, Dolly embodies the ' perfect' wife and mother in ways that Anna no longer can after her meeting Vronsky. Tolstoy uses Dolly to show the life that is available to women who are stationary, virtuous, and pathetic.

Presenting a contrast to the traits of Dolly Oblonsky, every aspect of Anna Karenina seems to come in abundance. Tolstoy writes that, " it was as if a surplus of something so overflowed her being that it expressed itself beyond her will, now in the brightness of her glance, now in her smile. She deliberately extinguished the light in her eyes, but it shone against her will in a barely noticeable smile." (1. 18. 50) Anna comes in excess, characterized by a vitality and energy beyond her conscious control, and her constant motion speaks to her inherent sexuality. Unlike Dolly, her introduction to the novel is independent: for the first several chapters of Anna Karenina the reader gets to know her as simply Anna, not the wife or sister of someone or another. The cold stringency of Anna's husband makes the reader root for Vronsky and Anna's union, no matter the cost. But Tolstoy first expresses his

disdain for and the imminent demise of Anna in Chapter 29, in which a watchman is run down by a train. He was “either too drunk or too bundled up because of the freezing cold” (1. 29. 81) to hear the incoming train, and is cleaved in half. This is the reader's first hint that Vronsky and Anna's story will read less like a love story and more like a tragedy. At a ball shortly before this train ride, Kitty describes Anna as “intoxicated with the delighted admiration she was exciting” (1. 23. 70) and high on Vronsky's attention. Then, on the train, Anna “with her little deft hands...took out a cushion, laid it on her knees, and carefully wrapped up her feet.” (1. 29. 85) Tolstoy's imagery suggests that this incident, paired with the scene on the train proves that Anna, just like the watchman, is both blind and deaf to her impending tragedy. Though loved by all for her motion, she does not yet realize that she is trapped between her passion for Vronsky and a society that shuns women who act on passions outside the home.

Though Tolstoy has certainly created a sympathetic character, he implies that Anna's actions hold her accountable for her unhappiness upon returning home to her son and husband. Her sexuality and independence in Moscow has opened a door for her that cannot be closed. When she sees her son for the first time since returning from Moscow, Anna says that Seryozha “like her husband, aroused in [her] a feeling akin to disappointment.” (1. 32. 95) Unlike Dolly, she is unable to find contentment within the home. When it comes time to make love to her husband, “[Anna's] face had none of the eagerness which, during her stay in Moscow, had fairly flashed from her eyes and her smile; on the contrary, now the fire seemed quenched in her, hidden somewhere far away.” (1. 33. 102). Compared to Dolly, Anna is no longer

Tolstoy's ideal woman because she seeks something beyond her life as a wife and mother.

Tolstoy's ideal woman is evident in his treatment of female characters in *Anna Karenina*. Dolly's choice to forgive her husband and dedicate herself to her home reflects the abdication of her happiness to a patriarchal double standard. This choice stands in sharp contrast to Anna's growing dissatisfaction with her husband and child. Dolly Oblonsky is doomed to immobility within the home, while Anna is mobile yet headed towards death, scandal, and unhappiness. In treating Dolly as a foil for Anna, Tolstoy demonstrates his belief that women have no way out: they are perpetually trapped between the Madonna and the whore, and those women that lean too far towards the saintly Madonna (Dolly) and too far towards the passionate whore (Anna) are condemned to unhappiness. Thus, Tolstoy's women demonstrate his belief that a woman who is not a loyal wife is nothing at all.