

Parallels to
destruction and
conflict in anna and
vronsky's love story
as evinced...



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Anna Karenina is a story of split, conflict, schism and divide. Anna's battle for love, her struggle between what she needs and what she desires, her hatred of lies and her usage of them, her vacillation between *libre penseur* - liberal values- and old patriarchal and moral values - all reinforce the theme of internal conflict that leads to inevitable destruction. Leo Tolstoy, however, in a brilliant stroke of genius, uses the seemingly insignificant remark made by a passerby on the death of a guard in the first section of the book to elicit the overarching theme of brutal divide in Anna's struggle for love. By using a death to gain insight into a love affair, Tolstoy reveals his ability to weave apparently isolated and disconnected instances into the cloth of the overall work in a style so unique that it makes Matthew Arnold's tribute for the novel ring true: " We are not to take Anna Karenina as a work of art; we are to take it as a piece of life." Indeed, Tolstoy creates life in a book, transforming it into a place full of vitality and strength. The fascinating nature of the work lies in the way Tolstoy binds the novel together through an intrinsic and subtle thread of organization, where apparently delineated ideas are brought together in a functional coherence, a concept Tolstoy terms as the " labyrinth of linkages". This idea is ingeniously expressed by Richard F. Gustafson in " Leo Tolstoy: Resident and Stranger", where he writes that " Tolstoy organizes his work by a principle of inner spirit which unites not by logical connection but by a unity inherent within the variety." (Gustafson 281). Establishing the " inner spirit" in the novel is what gives life to Anna Karenina. Just like the current binds the voluminous velocity of the youthful river, it is this " unity inherent within the variety" that binds the novel together. The code to decrypting the work, therefore, lies in the

understanding of how, as Tolstoy puts it, " images, actions and situations"
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(Gustafson 281) work in collaboration with the overall plot. The entirely isolated and unrelated incident of a guard's death then becomes an important key in understanding the conflict that overrides the novel as a predominant theme. This paper contends that although the death of a guard during the first meeting between Anna and Vronsky at the railway station in St. Petersburg (I, xviii) is an apparently disparate and isolated incident, however, through close analysis of the "images, actions and situations" employed in the scene, one finds the key to understanding the dark, destructive and divisive nature of Anna's battle for a love that is displaced in the society in which Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* is set. The setting of the death of the guard is an important link in understanding the nature of Anna's adulterous love for Vronsky. Set in a crowded railway station of Saint Petersburg, the incident is the first death of the novel, and coincides with the first meeting of Anna and Vronsky. A physical death thus becomes the harbinger of the spiritual death of Anna Karenina. Not only is the railway and the city of St. Petersburg one of the repetitive symbols in *Anna Karenina*, it is of special significance in the symbolism of the guard's death. St. Petersburg is the city of modern, liberal values and one that is home to the followers of *comme il faut* - where everyone does what everyone else is doing, and individuality and spirituality are not central to the lives of its inhabitants. Furthermore, the station is the stark opposite of nature - the dark, imposing forms of metal and industry flourish here instead of the scenic beauty of nature. It is here in a city marked by hypocrisy and physicality, and in a station marred by ugliness that a guard is crushed to death, and Anna and Vronsky's ill-fated love story begins. The station is described in the following words in Chapter xvii, Part I; "The approach of the train was more and more

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evident by the preparatory bustle in the station, the rush of porters, the movement of policemen and attendants, and people meeting the train.... The hiss of the boiler could be heard on the distant rails, and the rumble of something heavy." In the next chapter, Tolstoy describes the scene in which the guard is crushed under the train, this way: " Just as they were getting out of the carriage, several men ran suddenly by with panic-stricken faces. The stationmaster too ran by in his extraordinary coloured cap. Obviously something unusual had happened. The crowd who had left the train were running back again." The words " bustle", " rush" and " movement" used in chapter xvii all elicit the frenetic activity on the station, where important looking men in uniforms - porters, policemen and attendants - all are in a busy commotion. The " heavy" train, the reason of the entire fuss, is ominously approaching the station - it is threatening in its " rumble", while the " distant" boiler gives off an evil " hiss". Furthermore, in the same chapter, the words " quivering", " hanging low", " frost", " stooping figure", " whining", " swaying" and " oscillating" have been effectively used to create a miserable image of an unwelcoming station, where happiness is nonexistent and gloom prevails. There is a " bitter frost", and a man has been " crushed" by the moving train. The " mutilated corpse" and the talk of the " horrible death" augment the dreary tone. The dark language not only foreshadows the death of the guard, but the fatally destructive meeting of Anna and Vronsky. Tolstoy uses anaphoric device in which similar words are repeated consecutively to emphasize the importance of a particular theme. In this case, the station is linked with Anna's struggle for love, by binding it together with the theme of destructive despair. It is this element of dark, destructive gloom that is the " inner spirit" which binds the isolated station

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in St. Petersburg with Anna's experience of love. Indeed, the fulfillment of her physical desire with Vronsky in chapter xi, part II is described in equally dark, destructive and gloomy words: " She dropped her once proud and gay, now shame-stricken, head, and she bowed down and sank from the sofa where she was sitting, down on the floor, at his feet." In addition, the repeated use of the words " guilty", " sinful", " humiliation", " horror", " awful", " revolting", " fearful", " shame", " pitiful", " loathing" and " despair", all closely packed together within one short chapter, reinforces the disgust and shame that Anna feels. What was meant to be the reward of her passion for Vronsky is described in terms of punishment and despair, and the language serves to reinforce this sense of loss. David H. Stewart in his article " Anna Karenina: The Dialectic of Prophecy" elaborates on how an individual incident is connected to the overarching theme in the Anna Karenina: " The (individual) episode's power derives not only from the way in which Tolstoy conceived it but from the stylistic presentation in which poetic and rhetorical techniques assist in activating many areas of the reader's mind and in this way distribute his response over a broader, more generalized area of experience" (Stewart 268). In this case, through the use of language, specifically anaphora, two isolated situations have been intertwined in the patchwork of the overall theme of Anna's despair with a subtle thread. In addition to the gloom of the setting, the atmosphere at the station is one of utter confusion, a feverish rush akin to doomsday. This chaos is the immediate response of the crowd once they realize " something unusual", in this case, the guard's death, has happened. The terrified people running aimlessly around the station, not yet knowing what has happened, create a situation where intimate contact appears absurd and out of place. Anna and

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Vronsky, however, experience love at first sight in this very setting, which marks out the beginning of their love affair as an absurd happening that is out of place of the social milieu in which they exist, highlighting the socially unacceptable nature of their love. The public humiliation that follows the Anna-Vronsky love affair is also foreshadowed in this scene. " People coming in were still talking of what had happened." (I, xviii) Again, the particular has been used to explain the general theme. The element of a buzz among the crowd over the death has been magnified manifold, and transformed into scandalous gossip as it is projected forth in Anna's relationship with Vronsky. The public eye, its scrutiny of the characters' actions and the systematic outlawing of the society's " criminal" is a dominating feature of Anna's destruction. She resents her being ostracized from the Russian society she was once an endearing part of, especially when she speaks of her public humiliation at the opera, " Unpleasant...hideous! As long as I live I shall never forget it. She said it was a disgrace to sit beside me." (V, xxxiii) The public dishonor that mortifies Anna is in a sharp parallel to the " talking" at the station. However, while the dead guard is oblivious to his being the talk of the town, Anna, being alive and sensitive to the gossip around her, finds it torturous to cope with it. Tolstoy once wrote in response to a critic that Anna Karenina is a piece of architecture in which the " vaults are joined in such a way that you cannot notice where the keystone is". Apart from the creation of specific situations that draw links to the overall themes of the novel, Tolstoy has employed recurrent images throughout the course of the text that belie the presence of a centrally wedged and binding keystone within the structural design of Anna Karenina. Indeed, images are dispersed throughout the novel at crucial points in the plot, and when the strands of <https://assignbuster.com/parallels-to-destruction-and-conflict-in-anna-and-vronskys-love-story-as-evincd-from-their-first-meeting/>

these images are pulled together, a magnificent fresco is created. The images in the station scene of part I, chapter xviii are crucial strokes in the painting that is Anna's love affair with Vronsky. Symbols of the train, the "muffled up" guard and the "mutilated corpse" are effectively used in describing the death of the guard, while simultaneously drawing links to elicit an understanding of Anna's conflict for love. The train is a symbol of brutal destruction and irreconcilable divide. The train is "heavy" and ominous; it is the harbinger of industrialization and modernity that introduced liberal values to Russia, corrupting its spiritual soul. The train is a recurrent image of destruction whose main function is to divide - metaphorically and literally. While the watchman was quite literally "cut in two pieces", the train symbolizes the advent of modernity and European ideas of physicality, which served to divide Anna. Like Russia, Anna was split physically and spiritually. The guard's end was violent, drawing parallels with the violent nature of Anna's adulterous affair with Vronsky - she rips herself out of the comfortable social position she enjoys, and flings herself in the dangerous path of adultery. In physical and spiritual terms, she was "cut in two" as a result of this. She is torn between the need to have a fulfilling family, and the desire to have a passionate love life. The violently divisive nature of her love clearly stands out as a dominating feature, and is heavily reflected in the death of the crushed guard. The image of the "muffled up" watchman is another example of a linkage that connects the specific to the general. Tolstoy describes the death of the guard in one simple yet striking sentence: "A guard, either drunk or too much muffled up in the bitter frost, had not heard the train moving back, and had been crushed." This one sentence is packed with strands of the overall themes of Anna Karenina. The train, the <https://assignbuster.com/parallels-to-destruction-and-conflict-in-anna-and-vronskys-love-story-as-evincd-from-their-first-meeting/>

brutal destruction, the “muffled up” insensitivity of Anna and the unfavourable conditions of the “bitter frost” surroundings all resonate within this one intelligent sentence. The guard is oblivious to his surroundings, and parallels can be drawn to Anna’s oblivion to her husband’s feelings and the society’s condemnation while she is pursuing the affair. She, like the “drunk” guard, is too caught up in the passionate physicality of Vronsky’s love that she fails to take into account how deeply grave her situation is. For instance, in chapter xxiii, part II, Anna is “terrified at what she had done” when she thinks of “her son, and his future attitude towards his mother”. However, she tries to “reassure herself with false arguments” and forces herself to imagine that “everything would remain as before”. Anthony Thorlby writes that Anna’s thoughts to herself belie a sense of “the pressure of unspoken considerations, of evasions and pretences” (Thorlby 60). Her inability to think of her situation in practical terms, and remain “muffled up” in her own world is one of the main reasons of the conflict her conscience is subject to. As Gustafson puts it, “Anna is not punished by Tolstoy for her sexual fulfillment. In a fuller sense, Anna’s story is a moral tragedy of self-enclosure...in her pursuit of love, she hides from her own truth.” (Gustafson 132). Her terror of experiencing the worst scenario possible causes her to underestimate the gravity of her situation. Anna is not honest to her own self, and in failing to confront her reality, she is crushed like the guard who does not realize the train is “moving back”. Anna’s love for Vronsky was, indeed, surrounded by the cold and unwelcome snare of the Russian society, and was fuelled by Anna’s blind ignorance of the consequences of her illicit passions. In the end, just like the watchman, Anna is “crushed”, both physically and spiritually. The image of the “mutilated corpse” is disturbing, <https://assignbuster.com/parallels-to-destruction-and-conflict-in-anna-and-vronskys-love-story-as-evienced-from-their-first-meeting/>

not only for the characters present at the station, but also because the image comes back to haunt at a time when Anna has consummated her relationship with Vronsky. At the station, Oblonsky is distressed over the sight of the body; he not only becomes “evidently distressed”, but frowns and is “ready to cry”. His repeatedly laments “How awful!”, and “Anna, if you had seen it!”, implying the horrendous nature of the deformed corpse. The body, as we learn later, is “cut in two pieces”, and is distorted beyond repair. In chapter xi of part II, we see fulfillment of Anna’s physical desire demarcated by the image of a lifeless body falling at the feet of its murderer. Vronsky has fulfilled the “one absorbing desire of his life”, yet he feels “what a murderer must feel, when he sees the body he has robbed of life”. Instead of ecstatic elation, there is a deep sense of shame. In Anna he sees the proof of his crime – and “in spite of all the murderer’s horror before the body of his victim, he must hack it to pieces”. The murderous brutality of the guard’s death resonates in this scene, where Anna, the object of Vronsky’s love, is likened to a dead, lifeless corpse who must be cut up mercilessly. Anna has died before her death. She has become the “mutilated corpse” that invokes pity and horror in its onlookers. Just like Oblonsky is moved on how “awful” the guard’s corpse was, Anna too, invokes pity at her shameful condition. The image of the guard’s corpse thus, is powerful in its ability to connect with the fate of Anna’s love. Tolstoy, with his keen observation of the minutest details, describes his characters’ actions and expressions in such a way that they serve to reveal significant truths about the individual character, or the society that particular character represents. Tolstoy is a master of depicting the minutest details and changes in his characters and, with his penchant for forming a subtle network of links throughout his plot, <https://assignbuster.com/parallels-to-destruction-and-conflict-in-anna-and-vronskys-love-story-as-evincd-from-their-first-meeting/>

skillfully connects the particular to the general. In closely looking at how the characters behave at the station in chapter xviii, part I, important links can be drawn to understanding the nature of Anna-Vronsky love affair. Through Vronsky's eyes, Tolstoy gives us a detailed view of the exquisitely charming facial expressions of Anna Karenina, as we, along with Vronsky, see her for the first time. Apart from the loveliness of her features, what enralls Vronsky is the liveliness in her expressions, the "suppressed eagerness which played over face, and flitted between the brilliant eyes and the faint smile that curved her red lips." Her eyes and smile are enchanting to behold. However, alongside her beauty of her charm, the "suppressed" nature of it is also revealed throughout the chapter. "It was as though her nature were so brimming over with something that against her will it showed itself now in the flash of her eyes, and now in her smile. Deliberately she shrouded the light in her eyes, but it shone against her will in the faintly perceptible smile." Yet again, Tolstoy employs anaphora to convey a sense of the restraints and limitations Anna's life has. The life in her nature is revealed "against her will", "brimming" out from underneath her inner depths, struggling to express itself. She "shrouded" this life, pushing it back within her "deliberately", but it resisted her efforts and once again "shone against her will" in her "faintly perceptible smile". The repetition of words and phrases that elicit Anna's struggle to contain the life within her give us a glimpse of the restraint she has accustomed herself to in her years of marriage to Alexey Karenin. It seems as if, after years of suppressing herself, she is allowing herself to live for the first time: "As she spoke she let the eagerness that would insist on coming out show itself in her smile." A part of her has been locked away for years, and it is at this moment that we see <https://assignbuster.com/parallels-to-destruction-and-conflict-in-anna-and-vronskys-love-story-as-evincd-from-their-first-meeting/>

glimpses of it. Interestingly, at this point of the story, Vronsky, just like the reader, knows nothing about Anna and how cold and unappealing her husband is. He is unaware of the lack of love she feels towards her husband, or how her womanhood has been reduced to the role of a dutiful wife and mother. He has not been introduced to the Anna that yearns for a passionate love, yet in this first glimpse of Anna, Tolstoy gives a peek into her restrained life. Indeed, Anna's battle for love revolves around this very suppression she feels within her marriage and her lack of fulfillment in her married life. The failure of the marriage is the cause of the destructive love affair - a link that has been effectively established in the very first meeting between the ill-fated lovers. Countess Vronsky is another conspicuous character in the scene, whose actions and gesture reveal the menacing nature of Russian society. Tolstoy uses strikingly effective word choice to introduce this lady in the novel: " His mother, a dried-up old lady with black eyes and ringlets, screwed up her eyes, scanning her son, and smiled slightly with her thin lips." The image this one sentence conjures is dark, unpleasant and threatening. Vronsky's mother, we have been told before, is a woman of a colourful past, having multiple affairs during her youth. Here, the " black" soulless eyes, the scrutiny with which she looks at her son and the mean smile that spreads on her lips serve to enhance the image of Countess Vronsky as a dishonest and insincere figure. There is a cruelty in the way she scrunches up her eyes to look at her son. This is not the look of love a mother would give to her son. In a small gesture, the crude nature of her character is revealed. Emile Melchior writes in her criticism of Anna Karenina, that Tolstoy " observes, listens, takes in whatever he sees and hears, and for all time, with an exactness which we cannot but admire." (Melchior). It is this <https://assignbuster.com/parallels-to-destruction-and-conflict-in-anna-and-vronskys-love-story-as-evienced-from-their-first-meeting/>

acute observation that pours out forth from the pen of Count Leo Tolstoy, and breathes life into his words. Indeed, in the depiction of the Countess, and her “ wrinkled hand”, Tolstoy gives a sense of the wretchedness of the lady who says clichéd phrases that make one cautious of her sincerity towards the other. The Countess, in her character, is an image of the wretched high class Russian society. The society, just like the Countess, is a victim of *comme il faut* – it is kind towards the ones who put up appearances, and spiteful of those who don’t. Such a society disregards Levin and esteems Oblonsky and Vronsky despite Levin’s moral superiority over both men. It is the same Countess, and indeed the same Russian society, that ostracizes and disgraces Anna for her love affair with Vronsky and pushes her into the destructive despair that leads to her death. Thus, through the pitiful depiction of Countess Vronsky, Tolstoy has in effect depicted the Russian society that is equally pathetic. Anna Karenina is a story of destructive divide that has been told in a powerful style that is unique to Tolstoy. The “ inner spirit” Gustafson speaks of, that resides in the novel, is one that is forcefully alive within the station scene in chapter xviii, part I. The scene begins with an unusual meeting between Anna and Vronsky, while the station, the setting of their meeting, is frenzied at the oncoming of a train. The end is demarcated by the violent and brutal death of the “ muffled up” guard, which Anna sees as an “ ill omen”. The death, indeed, lays out the sequence of events for Anna’s ill-fated love affair with Vronsky: it is bizarre, chaotic and in the end, brutal.