

Actions speak louder
than words



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Facial expressions and body language communicate one's intentions and emotions far better than words. Leo Tolstoy, in *Anna Karenina*, describes a plethora of physical descriptions, enabling the reader to more completely understand the characters' emotional state of mind. Other characters and the narrator frequently describe Anna's shoulders. When Vronsky and Levin look at them, they have a surge of excitement. Dolly and Kitty notice them and are impressed. The narrator depicts her shoulders in times of discontentment or pain. In all three cases, Anna's shoulders signify the mood at the time of the interaction. Anna's shoulders are a tangible manifestation of her mental and emotional state, and what kind of energy she expresses.

When Anna's shoulders are described for the first time, Anna also acts promiscuously for the first time, by dancing with Vronsky, whom is expected to propose to Kitty. Kitty admires Anna's dress, which exposed her shoulders and chest. She emphasized that "the black dress with luxurious lace was not seen on her; it was just a frame, and only she was seen – simple, natural, graceful, and at the same time gay and animated" (p. 79). Anna's dress choice is evidence of her mood; she wanted to fit within the "frame" of society's expectations for her, yet still expose her exuberant nature.

While still conforming to society's expectations, she sympathizes with social outcasts, foreshadows her future affair. At the ball when Anna is exposing her shoulders, Kitty walks over to Anna, and interrupts a conversation, where Anna is saying, "No, I don't throw stones" (p. 79). This is a reference in the bible when a woman is caught in the act of adultery. The woman is dragged into public, completely naked. The crime for adultery at the time was stoning. Jesus says, "He that is without sin among you, let him cast the first

stone at her” (John 8: 7). When Anna says, I don’t cast stones, she is saying that she is not without sin, but also that she may sympathize with a woman who commits adultery. The circumstances – her flirtatious mood, exposed shoulders, and the conversation — foreshadow her leaving her husband in favor of Vronsky, her future lover.

Once Anna becomes more comfortable with her expressive mannerism, Vronsky follows the opportunity until they consummate their relationship. The narrator compares this interaction; “ as the murderer falls upon this body with animosity, as if with passion, drags it off and cuts it up, so [Vronsky] covered [Anna’s] face and shoulders with kisses” (pp. 149-150). In this graphic description, the reader becomes aware of the toxic physical relationship the characters have created. Anna’s shoulders — the tangible revealing of her previous mental restraint- inform the reader of the characters’ actions. By comparing their physical relationship to a murder, Anna — and the reader — is forced to recognize that Vronsky killed her previously admired social standing because of “ these kisses” on her shoulder, (p. 150). Yet, she holds Vronsky’s love closely. He killed her mental resistance, and in doing so, encouraged her promiscuous behavior to grow.

After an extensive stretch of time, Anna is dying from puerperal fever, and she reconsiders the growth of her scandal. She no longer holds her defiance as a dear characteristic, which is apparent in how she now carries her shoulders. As she lay in bed, “ The doctor took her arms away, carefully laid her back on the pillow and covered her shoulders” (p. 413). She is no longer in a position of physical power, which is represented by the doctor covering her shoulders, as if to say, you need to stop exposing yourself and return to

your previous way of life. The physical recovering instigates verbal control, which she used to easily possess. She demands that Alexi Alexandrovich uncover Vronsky's face and forgive him, which he does. Once this is complete, she prepares to die.

Contrary to her plan, Anna miraculously lives, and resorts back to her previous risqué relationship with Vronsky, much to society's gossiping pleasure. Suppressed by the lies and exclusion, Anna decides to go to the opera to prove she does not care about society's expectations for her.

Vronsky describes Anna as she sits in a box at the show; "The setting of her head on her handsome, broad shoulders, and the restrained excitement and brilliance of her eyes and her whole face reminded him of her just as he had seen her at the ball in Moscow" (p. 546). Her shoulders are described as broad, which could mean they were drawing more attention than usual. It is interesting that the singer's shoulders are the only other shoulders described in this scene. Obviously, being the main performer, the singer is seeking attention. By also wearing a revealing dress, Anna is competing for attention with the performer. She succeeds. Vronsky, not looking for Anna knows where she is sitting "from the direction of all eyes" (p. 545). Anna is the center of attention. She ends up in a cyclical process: Anna is excited to prove she can act however she wants, so she dresses in a revealing manor exposing her shoulders, then when people stare and gossip she becomes even more excited. By showing her shoulders, she is physically displaying her emotional state of excited defiance toward social expectations.

In Anna's final moments of life, she loses her mental vigor. When she is at the train station looking for Vronsky in a completely agitated state, she

suddenly thinks of the train as a way to end her misery. “ Exactly at the moment when the space between the wheels came opposite her, she dropped the red bag, and drawing her head back into her shoulders, fell on her hands under the carriage, and lightly, as though she would rise again at once, dropped on to her knees” (p. 768). Tolstoy describes Anna as “ drawing her head back into her shoulders,” which could be a metaphor for her physical and emotional trial. During her entire relationship with Vronsky, there has been a struggle between what she verbally says and what her body reveals. When she meets Vronsky for the first time, “ she deliberately extinguished the light in her eyes, but it shone against her will,” (p. 61). At a party she encourages him to leave her alone, and when he refuses says, “ That only shows you have no heart,”... But her eyes said that she knew he had a heart, and that was why she was afraid of him.” (p. 139). This is a reoccurring struggle, so when Anna finally has no more mental strength to fight the oppression of her situation, she acts purely how her body has wanted to the entire time. In her dying moments, her head, which represents her mental strength, falls onto her shoulders, which represents her physical desire. Her final moments are her mental ending her externally expressed internal struggle.

This struggle can be related to Vronsky’s attention and Anna’s resistance. It is not accidental that both Anna’s shoulders and promiscuousness appear at the same time; when her shoulders are described, and when they are not, are based on her intentions. At the train station, when she first arrives in Petersburg and meets Vronsky, “ she deliberately extinguished the light in her eyes, but it shone against her will”(p. 61). Upon their meeting, her

shoulders are not depicted. Every other feature is described: her figure, expression, head, eyes, eyelashes, and lips. She tries to distinguish the light, which shows she is committed to maintaining her social expectations, despite her attraction to Vronsky. Similarly, at a party she encourages him to leave her alone, and again, her shoulders are not described. By dressing to expose her shoulders, she no longer attempts to restrain the defiant energy within her.

Tolstoy is aware of the relationship between mental thought and physical action; he expresses his understanding of body language as a form of communication through his descriptions of Anna's shoulders. While Anna's mental strength is what was extinguished by her inner struggle, other characters are aware of her trials because of her expression of her body, particularly her shoulders. When she allowed Vronsky to kill her social standing, she introduced the beginning to her tragic end. Had she never exposed her shoulders, she would have maintained her moderate existence and extensive prestige.