ANNA KARENINA

LEO TOLSTOY

LOVE... IT MEANS
TOO MUCH TO ME,
FAR MORE THAN YOU
CAN UNDERSTAND

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Translated with an Introduction and Notes by
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COUNT LEO NIKOLAEVICH TOLSTOY was born in 1828 into an aristocratic family at Yasnaya Polyana, his father's estate in Tula province, about 200 miles from Moscow. His mother died before he was two, and his father when he was nine. He studied Oriental languages and law at the University of Kazan, before leading a somewhat dissolute life until 1851, when he joined an artillery regiment in the Caucasus. It was here that he wrote his first stories. He then served as an artillery officer at the siege of Sevastopol during the Crimean War. A period in St Petersburg and abroad followed during which he studied educational methods he used for the benefit of peasant children at Yasnaya Polyana. In 1862 he married Sofya Behrs, and for some years led a secluded life as a country gentleman and author. *War and Peace* was finished in 1869 and *Anna Karenina* in 1877. He fathered thirteen children. In 1879, after undergoing a severe spiritual crisis, he wrote the autobiographical *Confession*, and from then on he renounced his earlier literary works, seeking to promote his views on religion, morality, pacifism, and sexuality. A champion of religious freedom and enemy of church dogma, Tolstoy assigned the royalties from his late novel *Resurrection* (1899) to a pacifist Christian sect. *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (1886) is most characteristic of his later work in its intense philosophical scrutiny of life and death. *The Kreutzer Sonata* (1889), a novella about adultery and sexual jealousy, is a masterpiece of disturbed narration. In 1901 Tolstoy was excommunicated by the Russian Orthodox Church for heresy. His life as a sage put his marital and family life under increasing emotional and financial strain. He died in 1910 of pneumonia at the railway station of Astapovo after fleeing his home.

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INTRODUCTION

Readers who do not wish to learn details of the plot will prefer to treat the Introduction as an Afterword.

Anna Karenina, one of the world's greatest novels, and with justification regarded by many as Tolstoy's finest artistic work, also marks the culmination of his career as a professional writer. Begun in 1873, when the author was 45 years old, it resumes and develops themes explored in previous works, most notably the epic *War and Peace*, which he had embarked on ten years earlier. These themes, which may be subsumed under the central question 'how to live?', are explored with a pressing urgency in *Anna Karenina*, for Tolstoy was increasingly overcome during the novel's protracted composition by an existential despair which is reflected in its closing pages. While *Anna Karenina* represents the summation of the literary journey that Tolstoy had completed thus far, all the way from *Childhood*, his first work of published fiction of 1852, the novel also looks forward to what he would write over the next three decades of his life.

Tolstoy emerged from the spiritual crisis which engulfed him upon completion of *Anna Karenina* no longer as a novelist, but as a crusader for his own brand of ethics-based Christianity. He did not completely forswear the writing of literature, indeed some of his best fiction dates from this next period, but he resolutely turned his back on publishing novels for what he regarded as the pampered educated classes. Having been the most highly paid author in Russia, he also now relinquished the earning of fees and royalties for personal enrichment, and channelled his creative energies into proselytizing his new-found religious beliefs. Many of their central precepts are adumbrated in embryonic form in *Anna Karenina*, and also underpin the enthralling love story which lies at the heart of its narrative, thus making it a truly pivotal novel in Tolstoy's oeuvre. As a work passionately bound up with questions of national destiny, *Anna Karenina* also belongs firmly to the great Russian literary tradition, which reached its fullest flowering during Tolstoy's lifetime.

Russian literature had developed along very different lines to those of Western Europe by virtue of the simple fact that there was no tradition of *belles lettres* until Peter the Great launched Russia on an accelerated Westernization programme at the beginning of the eighteenth

century, secularizing the arts in the process. The first Russian novel, Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, was not published until 1831 (so the old Countess who expresses surprise in his story 'The Queen of Spades', written and set in 1833, that there are any novels written in Russian, is not far from the mark). The belated start, coupled with the imposition of censorship by the end of the eighteenth century and the general lack of political freedom in the Tsarist state, ensured that artists in Russia inevitably practised their craft with a greater seriousness of purpose than elsewhere in Europe. There is, then, a fundamental difference from Western literature, memorably described by John Bayley as being so 'swaddled in the inertia of its accomplishment, the complacency of its prolongation', that even at its 'most urgent' it still sounds literary, with Chaucer's tone 'already professional'. By contrast, he writes, the 'critical dicta of the Russians seem like telegrams exchanged by revolutionaries after a *coup d'état* has begun, but before it is known whether it will succeed'.[1]

The nominally liberal era of Alexander I was replaced in 1825 by the reactionary regime of his martinet younger brother, Nicholas I, who immediately put his stamp on national life by dealing brutally with the idealistic young officers who staged the abortive Decembrist Uprising just as he was coming to power. As time went on, and Nicholas's reign grew more repressive, Russian writers increasingly came to be seen as bearers of the truth, and as moral leaders, particularly by those young members of the intelligentsia from a lowly social background who had benefited from a university education. Figures such as Vissarion Belinsky, Russia's first professional critic, saw literature first and foremost as a weapon for social reform, and believed writers had a vital role to play in helping to arouse in the Russian people a sense of their human dignity and bringing the barbaric institution of serfdom to an end. In 1847, as he lay dying in Germany, Belinsky penned a vituperative letter to Nikolay Gogol, in which he lambasted him for defending serfdom and absolutist government. Russia did not need sermons and prayers or an encouragement in the shameless trafficking of human beings, he thundered, but rights and laws compatible with good sense and justice. The fresh forces trying to break through in Russian society, he argued, were crushed by the weight of oppression, and so produced only despondency, anguish, and apathy. Only in literature, he declared, was there life and forward movement, despite the Tatar censorship.[2]

[1] John Bayley, *Tolstoy and the Novel* (London, 1966), 10.

[2] Vissarion Belinsky, *Letter to Gogol.* See Thomas Riha (ed.), *Readings in Russian Civilization*, vol. 2 (Chicago, 1969), 315–20.

Tolstoy was 21 when Belinsky's incendiary letter was smuggled into Russia and circulated secretly in manuscript two years later in St Petersburg. Unlike the earnest and impoverished Dostoevsky, who was imprisoned and exiled to Siberia for having been present at a reading of Belinsky's letter, Tolstoy was leading a dissolute life of gambling, carousing with gypsies, and going into society, to which his aristocratic pedigree gave him an automatic entrée. Within a few years, however, he had joined the army, developed a sense of responsibility, and discovered his vocation: to be a writer. Tolstoy's first work of fiction, the semi-autobiographical *Childhood*, was published in 1852 while he was serving in the Caucasus, and was immediately acclaimed for its acute powers of pyschological analysis, and what the critic Nikolay Chernyshevsky defined as 'purity of moral feeling'. By the time Tolstoy arrived in St Petersburg in November 1855, straight from the siege of Sebastopol, where he had penned several outstanding pieces of reportage about the realities of the Crimean War (and become a pacifist in the process), he was greeted as a conquering hero. He met Turgenev and other luminaries in the literary community for the first time, but soon fell out with them all and retreated back to his beloved country estate of Yasnaya Polyana. It was here, as an archetypal 'repentant nobleman', that he would write *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, both works in which peasants are ultimately the sources of the greatest wisdom.

Tolstoy re-entered civilian life at an exciting time in Russian history. After Nicholas I died in February 1855, the new Tsar, his son Alexander II, allowed scores of political exiles to return from Siberia, amongst them surviving Decembrists and Dostoevsky, and it became easier for Russians to travel abroad. The censorship was relaxed, paving the way for the foundation of new journals such as the *Russian Messenger* in 1856, and books and articles by Western thinkers suddenly became accessible. A number of important new cultural institutions opened, amongst them public libraries, the Mariinsky Theatre, the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture, and the St Petersburg and Moscow Conservatoires. To accompany Russia's belated embrace of industrialization, an extensive national railway network was finally inaugurated, with lines converging on the emerging business metropolis of Moscow. In 1867 a station on the main line to Kursk opened at Yasenki, a few miles from Yasnaya Polyana, enabling Tolstoy to make the two-hundred-mile journey north to Moscow in half the time it had previously taken. And, most importantly, the great 'Tsar Liberator', as Alexander II came to be known, also introduced a number of far-reaching political reforms at the beginning of his

reign, chief of which was the long-awaited Abolition of Serfdom in 1861. These new developments naturally exerted an impact on all the Russian arts, including Russian literature, which in the 1860s entered a glorious decade.

The era of the great Russian realist novel began in the dynamic early years of Alexander II's reign with the publication of Turgenev's *Rudin* in 1856. His masterpiece, *Fathers and Sons* (1862), provides a vivid depiction of the social ferment in Russia in the immediate aftermath of the abolition of serfdom, but sparked controversy by presenting an ambivalent portrait of a nihilist from the new revolutionary generation. Incensed on behalf of this new generation, Chernyshevsky responded with his novel *What Is To Be Done?* (1863), in which he creates a wholly positive revolutionary hero, and advocates woman's liberation and free love. Dostoevsky also concerned himself with contemporary Russia in his new, post-Siberian fiction, but diverged dramatically from both the urbane Westernizer Turgenev and the radical atheist Chernyshevsky. Beginning with *Notes from Underground* (1864), he launched a sustained assault on the Western political and philosophical ideas of utopian socialism he believed were contaminating Russian youth. In 1866 *Crime and Punishment* appeared in the *Russian Messenger* alongside the first chapters of *War and Peace*. Tolstoy shared his fellow writers' preoccupation with Russia, and their strong moral impulse, but was highly unusual in choosing to deal with an earlier historical period in his fiction during such a turbulent time.

By 1875, when Tolstoy began publishing *Anna Karenina* in monthly instalments (also in the *Russian Messenger*), Alexander II had been on the throne for twenty years, and much of the optimism which had greeted his accession had subsided. The terms of the emancipation proved to be so unsatisfactory that the radical intelligentsia began immediately to contemplate revolution, and the first assassination attempt was made on the Tsar's life in 1866. Even those of a more liberal persuasion were disconcerted when their peaceful attempts to inculcate the peasantry with a desire to embrace socialism failed in 1874. Amidst waves of arrests and a rapid deceleration in the progress of reform, hardened Populists turned to terrorism. The new mood of uncertainty and unease pervading Russian society is reflected in *Anna Karenina*. 'Everything was confusion in the Oblonskys' house', we read in the opening lines of the novel. Everything was also confusion in Russia. It is thus understandable why, at a time of such social and political upheaval, some of Tolstoy's more progressive readers were nonplussed by the idea of a novel about an aristocratic woman who

has an affair with an army officer. It seemed out of date to them, and their author out of kilter with his age. But of course *Anna Karenina* is very much more than a society novel. Through his characters Levin and Kitty, who embrace traditional values, Tolstoy constructs his own response to Chernyshevsky's inflammatory text and its utilitarian ideas, and the extensive sections in *Anna Karenina* devoted to agrarian issues engage in a very practical way with the seemingly intractable problems facing Russian rural inhabitants (who made up most of the population) as they struggled to survive in conditions which proved to be barely viable and highly unstable.

There was, however, nothing premeditated about the way in which Tolstoy began writing *Anna Karenina*. He first conceived the idea of writing about a high-society woman who has committed adultery a year after completing *War and Peace* in 1870, when his imagination was briefly struck by the idea of making her character pitiable but not guilty. At the same time, he began drafting an article about the 'woman question', a topic debated as hotly in Russia as elsewhere in Europe during this period. John Stuart Mill's influential *The Subjection of Women* had just been published, but the conservative Tolstoy rejected his call for equality between the sexes, and agreed with an article on the subject by Nikolay Strakhov, who argued that a woman's place was in the home. No doubt Tolstoy had also found much to concur with in Schopenhauer's article 'On Women' (1851), which he would have devoured along with all the German philosopher's other works in 1869, and which negated the idea of women's independence.

Tolstoy next proceeded to throw his energies into compiling a 700-page ABC book designed to help teach millions of illiterate Russian children how to read and write, and into trying to write a novel about Peter the Great. Two years later, however, a concatenation of chance occurrences served to bring the idea about the adulterous woman back into Tolstoy's mind. In January 1872 he was shaken after attending the autopsy of a young woman of his acquaintance called Anna Pirogova. Spurned by her lover, she had thrown herself under a goods-train at Yasenki, the railway station close to Yasnaya Polyana which had opened only five years earlier. Then, in the spring of 1873, Tolstoy was very taken with the analysis of marriage he read in a much-discussed article by Alexandre Dumas fils, for whom the struggle between man and woman was the central conflict in life. Prompted by reactions in the press to a controversial trial in which a husband was given a light prison sentence for murdering his unfaithful but estranged wife (divorce being illegal in France between 1816 and 1884), Dumas argued in

L'Homme-femme (1872) that a husband ultimately had the right to kill an unfaithful wife. Finally, in March 1873 Tolstoy also stumbled across an unfinished sketch for a story by Pushkin, the immediacy of whose narrative style launched him straight into the first draft of the opening of *Anna Karenina*.

Chance also plays an important role within *Anna Karenina*, which in its revelation of the often unconscious motivation behind human behaviour is a strikingly modern novel for its time, which was the high-water mark of Russian realism. Tolstoy depicts everyday life in an unidealized, objective way, indeed his dissection of the shifting states of emotional experience is often executed with a surgical precision, but a key element of his realism is also to depict his characters, Anna and Vronsky in particular, doing or saying things they had not intended. This technique certainly illustrates Tolstoy's acute powers of psychological analysis, and his frequent use of the word 'involuntary' when describing behaviour betrays his debt to Schopenhauer's concept of the 'Will'—that blind force driving the futile engine of human striving, and which can only lead to suffering. Along with the introduction of many random details, however, which appear to have no apparent function in the plot, symbolic or otherwise, this technique also provides us with a reminder of the contingency of being, thereby demonstrating a sensibility more readily associated with twentieth-century modernism. While Tolstoy never consciously allied himself with the artistic avant-garde, or indeed with any artistic group at all (although he was a modernist *avant-la-lettre* in his pioneering use of stream of consciousness), he did nevertheless set out to write a novel about modernity. While *War and Peace* is a retrospective work extolling the golden age of the Russian nobility and its patriarchal values in the era of the Napoleonic Wars, *Anna Karenina* is quite deliberately set in what Tolstoy shows us to be the much more disturbing present of 1870s Russia, in which those values are in the process of being eroded by the repercussions of very recent political reform.

The composition of *Anna Karenina* was in fact so contemporaneous with the times that events such as the Serbo-Turkish War, which broke out in June 1876, are not merely woven into the backdrop but inform the narrative: in the last part of the novel, completed in the spring of 1877, Vronsky enlists as a volunteer. By this time four years had passed since Tolstoy had started writing the novel, a challenging period during which he had begun to call into question his entire belief-system and, as a consequence, his attitude towards his fictional characters, who develop in sometimes unexpected ways and are rarely static. A sign of

what was to come can be found in the stridency of the anti-militarist views Tolstoy puts forward in the final part of *Anna Karenina*, which he submitted for publication in April 1877, just as Russia declared war on Turkey. Like most Russian novels, *Anna Karenina* had been appearing in serial form as each part was completed, and when the patriotic editor of the *Russian Messenger* took issue with Tolstoy's pacifism and refused to include the book's conclusion in his May issue, a scandal ensued which naturally only increased its popularity with the public. St Petersburg's leading bookshop sold an unprecedented five hundred copies on the day *Anna Karenina* first became available as a separate work in early 1878.[3]

Tolstoy confided in his wife that whereas in *War and Peace* he had loved the 'national idea as a result of the war of 1812', in *Anna Karenina* he loved the 'family idea'. While the tumultuous story of Anna's adulterous liaison with Vronsky takes centre-stage, it is important to recognize that, being the kind of writer he was, Tolstoy could not have proceeded very far without a counterweight. In fact, we have two: the troubled marriage of Stiva and Dolly Oblonsky, and the far happier one of Levin and Kitty. It is by telling their stories side by side, at times interweaving them, and by touching on many other stories of family life in *Anna Karenina* that Tolstoy is able to write a peerless work of fiction which is also an investigation of the institution of marriage, the nature of love, the destiny of Russia, and ultimately the meaning of life. It may be tempting to view the many chapters devoted to such pursuits as mowing, portrait-painting, mushroom-gathering, and participating in local elections as extraneous to the main story, and nothing more than a pleasant diversion. Film adaptations of the novel understandably tend to focus almost exclusively on Anna and Vronsky's passionate love affair, which is characterized by high drama and romance, but this is to illuminate just one layer of what is an extraordinarily complex work of art in which not one word is extraneous. Closer acquaintance with the novel's intricate structure reveals that everything in the novel is interconnected and contributes in some way to its central theme.

Chekhov famously said about *Anna Karenina* that not a single problem was resolved, but it was a novel which nevertheless fully satisfied, as all the problems were correctly stated.[4] The central problem, of

[3] N. N. Apostolov, *Zhivoi Tolstoi: zhizn' L'va Nikolaevicha Tolstogo v vospominaniyakh i perepiske*, first published 1928 (Moscow, 2001), 207.

[4] Letter to Alexey Suvorin, 27 Oct. 1888, in *Anton Chekhov's Life and Thought: Selected Letters and Commentary*, tr. Michael Henry Heim, ed. Simon Karlinsky (Berkeley, 1973), 117 .

course, relates to the fate of Tolstoy's captivating heroine Anna. Much of the attention of the considerable body of critical literature devoted to *Anna Karenina* is directed at exploring the cause of Anna's tragedy, particularly with respect to the novel's epigraph: *Vengeance is mine; I will repay*. If it is God taking revenge on Anna for committing adultery, it has reasonably been asked, then why are all the other adulterous characters in the novel not punished too? Why do Anna's philandering brother Stiva Oblonsky and her depraved friend Betsy Tverskaya escape divine justice? Or are we meant to understand that it is Anna who wreaks vengeance on Vronsky? Or that it is Tolstoy wreaking vengeance on Anna for the crime of being a beautiful and intelligent woman who dares to break the mould, and seek a fulfilling life, free from the constraints imposed on her gender by a hypocritical, patriarchal society? That was certainly the view of D. H. Lawrence, who was indignant that Anna had apparently fallen victim to Tolstoy's didactic urge. There is, in fact, no agreement amongst critics on whether Anna is a victim or not, and whether or not she is responsible for her own destiny. Tolstoy complicates matters considerably by not completing the epigraph: the words 'saith the Lord' are missing. So who *is* speaking?

What is successful about Tolstoy's characterization of Anna is her complexity. We are drawn to Anna when we first meet her for her warmth and generosity, and we are sympathetic to her desire to follow her heart and live life to the full after the sterility of her marriage to a dry bureaucrat of a husband to whom she has been married off at a young age. We admire her for wanting to live truthfully and openly, and suffer with her when she is forced into a new life of sterility when society closes its doors to her, while still welcoming Vronsky. And yet is it not also true that she rejects her role as wife and mother and becomes increasingly narcissistic? So much of her behaviour with Vronsky is taken up with the attention he pays to her, yet there is little evidence of what she gives to him. Dolly notices Anna's new habit of screwing up her eyes when she goes to visit her, as if she is unable to face reality.

Rather than take responsibility for her own actions, Anna alights on omens—the accident at the railway station, her recurrent dreams—and prefers to blame fate. Just as there are times when Karenin is not an unsympathetic character (as when he is filled with compassion after the birth of Anna's daughter, for whom he feels a tender affection), there are times when the reader's identification with Anna is challenged by her wilful and egotistical behaviour. If Tolstoy's characters change during the course of the novel, it was because his attitude towards them changed as his own thinking developed. It is, therefore,

not wholly surprising that *Anna Karenina* can be seen 'as an array of readings that contradict and diverge from each other, and that cluster around an opposition between personal truths and universal truth', as Vladimir Alexandrov has shown in his examination of the novel's many possible meanings.[5]

Levin similarly is a complex character, whose path to personal fulfilment and happiness is far from smooth. But it is as if he and Kitty inhabit a different novel. Anna seems to want to live like a romantic heroine, inspired by all the English fiction she reads, and the story of her love affair with Vronsky is full not just of drama, but melodrama. Ultimately, Anna's fate bears witness to her inability to gravitate from romance, which by its nature is not reality, to love, which is a far more prosaic and demanding proposition, as Levin and Kitty discover in the first months of their marriage. As Gary Saul Morson observes, the novel explicitly 'tries to redirect our attention to aspects of everyday living: love and the family, moral decisions, the process of self-improvement, and, ultimately, all that makes a life feel meaningful or leads us to contemplate suicide'.[6] Can we really see Anna's fate, then, in tragic terms? Tolstoy seems to invite us to subscribe to conventional views of romance because his Olympian narrator remains impersonal. It is easy, for example, to succumb to the idea that the horse race is an allegory of Vronsky's relationship with Anna, and that he is to blame for its failure, just as he is to blame for breaking his horse's back. But to some scholars this interpretation now seems a little too pat.

Tolstoy was naturally well aware of works such as Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857) and Zola's *Thérèse Raquin* (1867), but he wanted to write more than just another novel of adultery. He was also very fond of what his son Sergey called 'English family novels', whose faint shadow can be discerned behind the plot-lines and characterization of *Anna Karenina*. The stiff, aristocratic statesman Plantagenet Palliser, from Anthony Trollope's six 'Parliamentary Novels' (1864–79), seems in certain respects like a benign Karenin (with elements of Lady Glencora and Burgo Fitzgerald in Anna and Vronsky), while Anna shares certain physical traits with Hetty Sorel in George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859), to name just a few examples. Tolstoy had little interest, however, in emulating what he saw as a favoured plot-line of English novels, in which the hero 'puts his arm around her waist, then they get married, and

[5] Vladimir Alexandrov, *Limits to Interpretation: The Meanings of* Anna Karenina (Madison, Wisc., 2004), 297.

[6] Gary Saul Morson, *'Anna Karenina' in Our Time: Seeing More Wisely* (New Haven, 2007), 31.

he inherits an estate and a baronetcy'.[7] He was much more interested in what happens *after* his characters get married. The high incidence of marital discord Tolstoy depicts in *Anna Karenina* conveys a rather bleak vision of family life, but there were compelling artistic and moral reasons for why he ended his novel not with the melodramatic death of his adulterous heroine, but with a mundane conversation his hero Levin has with his wife on the veranda on a summer night after contemplating the stars. They have everything to do with the literary tradition in which Tolstoy was nurtured.

If Russian novelists trod a different path with regard to the content of their works, they also saw no reason to capitulate to the Western model in terms of form. As Tolstoy put it himself in one of the draft prefaces to *War and Peace*, 'in the modern period of Russian literature there is not one work of art in prose even slightly better than average that could fully fit into the form of a novel, epic, or story'.[8] Tolstoy was doing more than making a statement of fact by pointedly calling *Anna Karenina* a 'novel', for he had never previously used the term to describe anything he had written. There is also a possible degree of hidden provocation contained in this appellation, because deeper familiarity with the text of *Anna Karenina* encourages the interpretation of the Anna and Vronsky plot-line, partnered as it is by far less romantic stories, as almost a parody of the European novelistic tradition and the expectations engendered by it in the reader. Certainly it is important to resist the temptation to view *Anna Karenina* as exemplary of the European nineteenth-century realist novel, with which it is often identified, despite the many valid areas of correspondence. Its scope is far wider, and its richly symbolic structure, replete with recurring dreams and careful juxtaposition of contrasting stories and themes (such as Levin and Kitty's lawful wedding, followed by Vronsky and Anna's cohabitation abroad; and Nikolay Levin's death, followed by discovery of Kitty's pregnancy), is too much at odds with any perceived objectivity of depiction.

Even before Tolstoy self-consciously became a religious crusader, he was a religious artist who claimed that his real hero was the truth. With the Russian Orthodox Church in an increasingly moribund state after Peter the Great subordinated it to the state by abolishing the Patriarchate in 1721, it is possible to argue, as Richard Gustafson has

[7] Sergey Tolstoy, 'Ob otrazhenii zhizni v "Anne Kareninoi": iz vospominanii', *Literaturnoe nasledstvo*, 37/38, vol. 2 (Moscow, 1939), 567.

[8] L. N. Tolstoi, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, ed. V. Chertkov, 90 vols. (Moscow, 1928–58), vol. 16, p. 7.