

Passion and Marriage in *Anna Karenina*

Kelly A. Castillo

Leo Tolstoy, in his novel *Anna Karenina*, explores the concepts of passion and marriage and illustrates how unbridled passion, although sensual and revitalizing, tends to cause pain and suffering, whereas marriage, with effective communication and sensible passion, results in a stable relationship that will lead to the growth of both individuals. Tolstoy, in this 1886 narrative, describes a romance fueled by passion in the relationship between Anna and Vronsky. He demonstrates how infatuation gives meaning to these two individuals' mundane existence and how that same superficial infatuation, riddled with guilt, inevitably destroys both of their lives. He efficiently shows how a lack of communication results in feelings of jealousy, insecurity, and manipulation between the passionate couple, and how consistent communication creates a well balanced and secure marriage for Kitty and Levin. The latter couple's ability to discuss their emotions and doubts, without the fear of offending and losing each other, allows their relationship to flourish and their maturity to blossom. Levin and Kitty welcome passion into their lives, which is an essential element in any marriage, but they do not allow themselves to become absorbed by this sensation. Unlike the stable couple, Anna and Vronsky completely give in to their lust. Their self-absorbed relationship, which lacks any sense of spirituality, eventually results in their isolation and ultimately leads to their demise.

Anna Karenina is a woman who yearns for some semblance of passion in her life. She is the product of an arranged marriage to a man twenty years her elder, with whom she was never truly in love. According to Raymond Williams, "she has become a wife and a mother without ever having been a girl in love" (797). Anna's marriage is dull, predictable, and devoid of romance. Her husband methodically plans every facet of his life, including intimacy, which

leaves little room for passion and causes Anna to seek excitement elsewhere. When Vronsky begins to show his affection for her, Anna becomes infused with exuberance and feels revitalized. Dolly relays to Anna that Vronsky has fallen in love with her instantly, producing a profound effect on her: “a deep flush of pleasure suffused her face at hearing the thought that occupied her mind expressed in words” (Tolstoy 90). Anna had always felt alive when in the presence of Vronsky and “every time they met there surged up that feeling of animation which had seized her in the train on the morning when she first saw him” (Tolstoy 116).

Initially, ambition was Vronsky’s sole passion in life; however, once passed over for a promotion within his regiment, he starts to feel disenchanting and neglected. He becomes acquainted with Anna and is immediately intrigued by her beauty and charm. His interest in this married woman “caused such a sensation and attracted so much notice in Society” that he began to feel recognized and emboldened (Tolstoy 279). Anna fills Vronsky with passion and desire. Her eyes and smile have an “uncontrollable radiance” that “set him on fire” every time she speaks (Tolstoy 76).

Vronsky and Anna become overwhelmed by their passion and can think of nothing beyond their infatuation. Both of these individuals are looking for meaning in their lives and in the course of this quest lose themselves in a passionate encounter. At first, Anna tries to dissuade Vronsky’s attempts, but she is overcome by his constant pursuit of her. Anna soon realizes that his advances occupy the “whole interest of her life” (Tolstoy 116). Her passion for him grows rapidly and every time she sees him, she feels “her heart fill with excitement and guilty joy” (Tolstoy 134). Their love completely absorbs them, and they give no thought to the consequent damage it will cause those around them. Vronsky has no regard for Anna’s husband or her child, and decides that “every action in his life now has one aim” (Tolstoy 96). He feels

that “all the happiness of life and the only meaning of life for him now [is] in seeing and hearing her” (Tolstoy 96). Nikolai Strakhov notes that, “They give themselves over to their love completely” (763).

Vronsky and Anna have a torrid love affair, but this passion is not built on a solid foundation; rather, it is constructed out of lies, deception, and guilt. Tolstoy implies that no lasting relationship can be born out of negative emotions and untruthful actions without causing serious difficulties afterwards. At first, Anna and Vronsky feel no remorse when lying to her husband and society; as time goes on, the deception begins to wear at their hearts. From their first sexual encounter to the conception of their child, every action of theirs has to be hidden and kept secret, which ultimately destroys the meaning and importance of their most endearing moments. Anna’s guilt over the betrayal of her husband and the neglect of her son causes her such sorrow and misery that she falls into a deep depression and thinks that death during childbirth will be the only answer for her pain. After having a vision that foreshadows this expected death, Anna says, “I am very glad that I shall die” (Tolstoy 329). Vronsky, who was never affected by lying in the past and feels that it is acceptable to deceive a woman’s husband, begins to disagree with all the deception and comes to see it as “revolting to his nature” (Tolstoy 168). Whenever the couple unites in secret, he is overcome with the awkward feelings caused by their dishonesty. The more that Anna declares her desire to commit suicide, the more Vronsky is filled with unbearable guilt. As M. S. Gromeka states, “It is impossible to destroy a family without bringing about its unhappiness, and it is impossible to build a new happiness on this old unhappiness” (768).

Anna and Vronsky’s relationship is based on superficiality. The love that they feel for one another is shallow and has little to do with actual concern for one another. Their passion is

based purely on attraction and lust, so much so that they fall in love at “the first glance, without preliminary conversations about tastes and convictions” (Strakhov 763). Along with many other characters in the book, Vronsky is infatuated with Anna because he does not know the true nature of her being. While she has the ability to speak to people in a manner that inflates egos, she never really displays her true intentions and emotions. As mentioned by Merezhkovsky, “Anna loves and only loves. We scarcely know what she felt or thought, how she lived” (772). Anna never tries to discover what Vronsky’s character is truly like. Before they met, Vronsky was a confirmed bachelor who thought marriage and fidelity were outdated and who was “a man unprepared for a relationship of any permanence” (Williams 795). Although a physical bond holds Anna and Vronsky together, they have no sustaining connection. They never speak “about anything except love, and even their love speeches are insignificant” (Merezhkovsky 772). From the furnishings in their house to the conversations they share, this lustful couple leads an extraneous life that cannot foster an enduring relationship.

One of the only things revealed about Anna is that she desires the life of a tragic figure. At the beginning of the novel, while Anna is reading a fictitious novel, she feels as if she is the heroine of the story and wishes to live her life as such. As Gary Morson indicates, “For Anna, everything seems to fit a melodramatic plot centering on a grand passion” (834). Anna is above all a narcissist who, in order to feel alive and significant, yearns for a life full of drama and excitement. As Morson observes, Anna consciously puts herself into a situation that she knows will fail in order to fill her life with intense excitement and emotion. In Anna’s mind “true life is lived when it is most intense, when it is heavily plotted, when it most resembles a romance, and when it is farthest of all from ordinary happiness or daily routine” (Morson 835). Even when Anna is offered a divorce, she denies it; not because she feels belittled by Karenin’s generosity,

but because she wants to attempt martyrdom. Anna's sense of tragedy is also shown in her attitude toward her children. If Anna loved her son as much as she claimed to, she would stay with him despite her love of Vronsky. Anna abandons her son, but never allows herself to stop suffering over her decision. She declares her undying love for him, but also states, "I love those two beings only, and the one excludes the other" (Tolstoy 580). She wants melodrama in relation to her children, so she "loves the child she cannot have and neglects her present child, whose needs are prosaic and unromantic" (Morson 836). In a desperate attempt to escape the daily routine, Anna continuously creates scenarios that will cause harmful disruptions between her and Vronsky, eventually resulting in Vronsky regarding her as a burden.

Anna and Vronsky never form a pattern of consistent, meaningful communication, which severely damages their relationship. Throughout the novel, Anna pushes Vronsky away every time he tries to speak to her about important issues. When Anna tells Vronsky about her confession to Karenin, he wants to discuss it with her, but she replies, "Don't let us talk about it" (Tolstoy 289). Later on, when Anna is in total despair over the loss of her son, she realizes "She could not share it with Vronsky and did not wish to" (Tolstoy 483). Eventually, Anna reproaches Vronsky for leaving her alone in her misery, completely "forgetting that she herself had hidden from him all that concerned her son" (Tolstoy 490). The lack of communication causes Anna to become jealous and manipulative toward Vronsky. Anna, forced to stay in the house and away from society, begins to accuse Vronsky of infidelity and of losing his love for her. However, since Anna has never properly communicated to Vronsky her true feelings toward him, he cannot understand why she creates so many false images of him. Her insecurity causes Vronsky to become agitated with her, and he begins to feel that her love is a "dismal, burdensome love" (Tolstoy 604). Anna's pain, jealousy, and insecurity ultimately lead her to

suicide, her final and most devastating act of manipulation. Vronsky, unable to cope with the pain of losing the one thing he loved in life, ships himself off to war in the hope that he will not return. In the end, the couple's blinding passion overwhelms them and hinders their communication so drastically that it results in their downfall.

By contrast, the relationship between Levin and Kitty exemplifies a well-rounded, functioning marriage. Levin and Kitty's intimacy thrives because it possesses all the things that Anna and Vronsky's affair lacks: effective communication, mutual trust, shared responsibility, and spiritual sensibility. Levin and Kitty's happiness is not easily achieved; it takes work and dedication. After a few months of marriage, Levin realizes that "It only looked easy, but to do it, though very delightful, was very difficult" (Tolstoy 436). Levin and Kitty succeed because they are satisfied with their daily lives, their routine, and each other.

Throughout their relationship, Levin and Kitty's frequent discussions on important issues display their true emotions. In order to begin their romance with *tabula rasa*, Kitty asks Levin, prior to the beginning of their relationship, to forgive her for her previous actions. In relation to Vronsky, Kitty tells Levin, "I was carried away. I must ask you: can you forget it?" (Tolstoy 370). Levin not only exonerates Kitty but asks her to forgive his transgressions as well. They never place blame on each other or make one another feel guilty. This reluctance to judge proves crucial in building an open and honest flow of communication. Such flexibility and tolerance allow Levin and Kitty to feel comfortable when conversing and diminishes the fear of losing one another. They are able to maintain this position because their relationship is not superficial. Levin and Kitty also discuss jealousy, which tends to be a sensitive topic for couples. When Levin stays out late drinking and visiting with Anna, Kitty is upset but she makes sure "not to hinder his relating everything" by listening attentively and by not lashing out at him (Tolstoy

636). Eventually, upon hearing that he spent his time with Anna, Kitty breaks down and a quarrel ensues. In order to reconcile their differences, Levin and Kitty discuss how they feel about the situation until the early hours of the morning. This approach allows them to forgive each other completely.

Levin and Kitty's ability to converse with one another about their innermost feelings creates a stable marriage in which both individuals feel secure in themselves and with the other's independence. Levin and Kitty's self-confidence and maturity grow as their marriage progresses. Levin gains a self-assurance that he had never had before, as he becomes a man who no longer feels the need to prove his worth to others. For example, when he and Oblonsky run into Vronsky, instead of treating him poorly, Levin acts with civility and actually befriends him. While visiting Dolly, Kitty sees Anna and reacts in the same manner, treating Anna amicably even when she makes a snide remark about Levin. Another result of Kitty's sense of security is her ability to let Levin have his independence. When she notices that he is "dull in Moscow," she encourages him to attend the elections in Kashin with his brother, despite her confinement and inability to accompany him (Tolstoy 584). Kitty's maturity helps her to realize the necessity of independence, and even though she hates to part with him, "she forgot her own pain in his gladness" (Tolstoy 522). This type of security helps extinguish jealousy and creates a warm and comforting environment.

Levin and Kitty are quite reasonable in their marriage but still show passion for one another. When Levin and Kitty first unite after their mishap, they fall madly in love with one another. Levin's brother makes the mistake of calling Kitty "a fine girl," words Levin thought "were so ordinary, so insignificant, so inappropriate to his feelings" (Tolstoy 363). Kitty shows her passion for Levin by romantically telling him that she is thinking about "the nape of his

neck” (Tolstoy 441). Another passionate moment occurs when Levin says, “Not once since our marriage have I said to myself that things might have been better than they are...” (Tolstoy 610). Levin and Kitty love each other passionately but never allow themselves to get carried away by this emotion.

The most important aspect of Kitty and Levin’s relationship, which is completely lacking in Anna and Vronsky’s relationship, is a firm spiritual belief. Levin and Kitty both have a strong spiritual nature that results in the realization that there are more important things in life than self-gratification. From the beginning of the novel, Levin, although an agnostic, understands that there has to be more to life than fulfilling desire. Oblonsky tells Levin that the aim of civilization is to find enjoyment in everything, and Levin replies, “If that is its aim, I’d rather be a savage” (Tolstoy 33). Kitty, because of her upbringing as well as her time at the spa, understands that “morality involves...the ability to make oneself *the minor character in someone else’s story*” (Morson 837). Kitty, unlike Anna, concludes, “To forget oneself and to love others is the most important thing in life (Tolstoy 204). Anna, with her lack of maturity, considers only one thing important: whether she and Vronsky love one another. Beyond this, “No other considerations exist” (Tolstoy 403). Although she believes in God, Anna never once gives herself over to spirituality. She chooses not to seek comfort in religion because she knows that to do so would be “to give up that which alone gave a meaning to her life,” i.e. Vronsky (Tolstoy 263). Vronsky is the only character who never once thinks spiritually about anything. Throughout the novel, “only Vronsky remains thoroughly carnal from beginning to end” (Strakhov 763). Levin and Kitty’s spirituality make them compassionate, thoughtful people, helping them to become better partners. Their relationship is in direct contrast to that of Anna and Vronsky, whose lack of spirituality and whose self-absorbed lives lead them down an immoral path.

Leo Tolstoy's novel *Anna Karenina* is an engaging work of fiction that illustrates the many facets of passion and marriage experienced in late nineteenth century Russia; many of these aspects of marriage remain prevalent in today's society as well. Tolstoy elegantly demonstrates how uninhibited passion combined with a lack of spirituality and communication will inevitably lead to pain, suffering, and failure. Through Kitty and Levin, Tolstoy exhibits a realistic, functioning marriage that has the capability to endure over time. Levin and Kitty's marriage is stable because they have passion in their lives, supported by maturity, communication, and spirituality. Unlike Anna and Vronsky, who require an overabundance of drama in their lives, Kitty and Levin "enjoy the small cares of daily life," and their main "focus is on the immediate and present" (Morson 835). *Anna Karenina* is a work that has withstood the test of time, one that continues to reach all individuals with serious thoughts about marriage and passion. The most profound viewpoint found in Tolstoy's novel is that a successful marriage requires the acceptance that life will not always be a series of sensational moments, and that true contentment lies in the ability to enjoy all the moments in between.

Works Cited

- Gromeka, M.S. "The Epigraph and the Meaning of the Novel." *Anna Karenina* (Norton Critical Edition). Trans. The Maude Translation. Ed. George Gibian. New York: Norton, 1995. 768-769.
- Merezhkovsky, D.S. "Tolstoy's Physical Descriptions." *Anna Karenina* (Norton Critical Edition). Trans. The Maude Translation. Ed. George Gibian. New York: Norton, 1995. 769-777
- Morson, Gary Saul. "Anna Karenina's Omens." *Anna Karenina* (Norton Critical Edition). Trans. The Maude Translation. Ed. George Gibian. New York: Norton, 1995. 831-843

Strakhov, Nikolai. "Levin and Social Chaos." *Anna Karenina* (Norton Critical Edition). Trans.

The Maude Translation. Ed. George Gibian. New York: Norton, 1995. 762-765

Tolstoy, Leo. *Anna Karenina* (Norton Critical Edition). Trans. The Maude Translation. Ed.

George Gibian. New York: Norton, 1995.

Williams, Raymond. "Lawrence and Tolstoy." *Anna Karenina* (Norton Critical Edition). Trans.

The Maude Translation. Ed. George Gibian. New York: Norton, 1995. 792-798